

**EXPLORING THE ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF DISTRICT OFFICIALS IN
SUPPORTING PRIMARY SCHOOL MANAGEMENT TEAMS IN JOHANNESBURG
NORTH DISTRICT**

By

SENZEKAHLE SINOTHANDO GCINA MBOKAZI

submitted in accordance with the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF EDUCATION

in the subject

MANAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP

in the

COLLEGE OF EDUCATION

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA

Pretoria

SUPERVISOR: Prof J.S. Rubbi Nunan

Date: 13 January 2026

DECLARATION

Name: Senzekahle Sinothando Gcina Mbokazi

Student number: 60113286

Degree: Master of Education (Management and Leadership)

Title: EXPLORING THE ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF DISTRICT OFFICIALS IN SUPPORTING PRIMARY SCHOOL MANAGEMENT TEAMS IN JOHANNESBURG NORTH DISTRICT

I declare that the above dissertation is my own work, and that all the sources that I have used or quoted from have been properly cited and acknowledged by means of complete references.

I further declare that I submitted the dissertation to originality checking software, and that it meets the required standards for originality.

I further declare that I have not previously submitted this work, or any part of it, for examination at Unisa or any other higher education institution for another qualification.



Signature

13/01/2026

Date

DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my father, whose guidance, inspiration, and example, as a master's holder himself, have been a true source of strength and motivation in this work. I extend my deepest gratitude to my siblings for their steadfast support, especially my late brother, my Irish twin, who always recognised my full potential and encouraged me to pursue it.

To my close friends, I am sincerely thankful for your unwavering support, assistance, and words of encouragement throughout this journey. I also dedicate this work to my late mother, my guardian angel and greatest advocate, whose enduring belief in me carried me through even the most difficult moments of self-doubt.

Above all, I dedicate this achievement to God, my Creator. Without His grace, mercy, and constant presence, this work would not have been possible.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to express my heartfelt gratitude to the following individuals whose support and guidance contributed significantly to the completion of this dissertation.

First, I am deeply indebted to my supervisor, Prof. Julie Shantone Rubbi Nunan, for her exceptional guidance, patience, and encouragement throughout this journey. Her unwavering support and scholarly insight have been invaluable and remain a true source of inspiration for my academic growth.

I also extend my appreciation to my fellow candidates whose collaboration, encouragement, and shared experiences have enriched this process and provided invaluable lessons. In addition, I acknowledge my advisory figures who, through their achievements and generosity in sharing their wisdom, reassured me of the attainability of this goal and offered guidance during pivotal moments of my journey.

ABSTRACT

This study explores the roles and responsibilities of district officials in supporting school management teams (SMTs) in primary schools in the Johannesburg North district. The transition from apartheid to South Africa's current democratic dispensation has significantly influenced the nation's education system. Following the enactment of the South African Schools Act (SASA) of 1996, the establishment of education districts enhanced accountability at the school level. Consequently, district offices have become responsible for overseeing curriculum management of designated schools. Despite these developments, the support provided to SMTs by district officials has often been perceived as inadequate, with principals identifying circuit managers as the least effective in assisting school leaders. A qualitative approach was adopted to examine the roles and responsibilities of district officials. A case study design grounded in the interpretivist paradigm explored the meanings, experiences and perspectives of 23 participants, comprising SMT members and district officials, from three primary schools in the Johannesburg North district. The data collection methods included semi-structured individual and focus group interviews, questionnaires and document analysis. Guided by the general systems theory, the study highlights that district offices and schools, as subsystems, are inherently interdependent and function collaboratively rather than in isolation. Through thematic analysis, emerging patterns and themes were identified across the data sources. The findings suggest that the effectiveness of schools is contingent on the efficacy of SMTs, supported by district officials. Challenges such as resource limitations restrict district officials' capacity to support SMTs effectively, causing disparities in the quality of support provided to SMTs. However, the study revealed that targeted support through professional learning communities, lead-teacher workshops and digital platforms helped mitigate these challenges. This research contributes to the literature on educational management by highlighting the complex relationship between district officials and SMTs. It recommends additional strategies to strengthen district planning with the goal of supporting the SMTs of primary schools more effectively. This includes empowering SMTs through continuous professional development and fostering stronger district-level collaboration. Findings from this study suggest that when district office managers address the identified challenges, this can lead to enhanced practices, improved policy formation, and improved decision-making at the school and district levels. Furthermore, systemic reforms at the

provincial and national levels of the Department of Basic Education are essential to ensure adequate resourcing and to promote long-term school improvement.

Keywords: District officials, school management teams, support, primary schools, roles and responsibilities, challenges.

QOTSO (ka Sesotho)

Phuputso ena e batlisisa ka dikarolo tse bapalwang le maikarabelo a diofisiri tsa setereke a ho tshehetsa dihlopha tsa matitjhere a tataisang boetapele (diSMT) dikolong tsa poraemari Seterekeng se ka Leboya ho Johannesburg. Phetoho ya ho tloha mmusong wa kgethollo ho tla ho wa jwale wa demokerasi e bile le tshusumetso e kgolo tlhophisong ya thuto ya naha. Ho latela ho phasiswa hwa Molao o laolang Dikolo Afrika Borwa (South African Schools Act (SASA) wa 1996, ho thehwa hwa ditereke tsa thuto ho matlafaditse kamohelo ya ho jara boikarabelo dikolong. Ka lebaka leo, diofisi tsa setereke di jara boikarabelo ba ho hlophisa le ho laola tsamaiso ya kharikhulamo dikolong tseo ba di kgethetsweng. Kantle le dintshetsopele tsena, tshehetso eo diofisiri tsa setereke di e fang diSMT dikolong tsa poraemari hangata e nkwa e sa lekana, diprinsipala di bolela hore katleho ya balaodi ba sekete ke yona e sa hlaliseng diphetho tse lebelletsweng ka ho thusa baetapele ba dikolo. Ho sebedisitswe mokgwa wa ho bokella le ho hlopholla datha eo e seng ya dipalo ho hlahloba dikarolo tse bapalwang le maikarabelo a jarwang ke diofisiri tsa sekete. Phuputso e hlalolang sehlooho ka botlalo moelelong wa sona wa nnete, e itshetlehileng ka hore nnete ke kutlwisiso ya motho ho ya ka diketso le diketsahalo tse mo etsahalletseng, e sebedisitswe ho ithuta ka ditlhaloso, dintho tseo batho ba fetileng ho tsona le mehopolo ya bankakarolo ba 23, ba nang le ditho tsa SMT le diofisiri tsa setereke ho tswa dikolong tse tharo tsa poraemari Seterekeng se ka Leboya ho Johannesburg. Mekgwa ya ho bokella datha e kenyeditse diinthaviu tsa dipotso tse hlophisitsweng le tse sa hlophiswang tsa motho ka mong le tsa sehlopha, mananepotso le tlhahlobo ya tokomane. Phuputso e tataiswang ke Theori ya Disistimi ka Kakaretso, e hatella hore diofisi tsa setereke le dikolo, jwalo ka disistimi tse nyane tse ikgethang ka hara sistimi e kgolo, di a tshehetsana le ho sebetsa mmoho ho na le ho sebetsa ka bonngwe. Ka ho batla le ho hlalosa mookotaba, dipaterone tse hlahellang le mookotaba di fumanwe mehloding ya datha kaofela. Lesedi le fumanweng le sisinya hore katleho ya dikolo e itshetlehile ka matla le bokgoni ba diSMT tse tshehetswang ke diofisiri tsa setereke, ho etsa mosebetsi o kgotsofatsang. Mathata a jwalo ka ditaba tse amanang le dikgokahano le kgaello ya disebediswa a thibela bokgoni ba diofisiri tsa setereke ho tshehetsa diSMT ka tshwanelo, ho etsang hore ho be le ho se lekalekane tshehetsong e fuwang diSMT. Le ha ho le jwalo, phuputso e bontshitse hore

tshehetso e lebelletsweng ka sehlopha sa matitjhere a sebedisanang ho ntlafatsa diphetho tsa thuto (professional learning communities (diPLC)),

dikopano tsa boitjhoriso tse etellwang pele ke matitjhere le disebediswa tsa theknoloji di thusitse ho fedisa mathata ana. Patlisiso ena e phehisa dingolweng tse seng di le teng tsa taolo ya dintho tse amanang le thuto ka ho hatella kamano eo hangata e nang le maikutlo a sa dumellaneng le ho fetisetsa matla/boikarabelo pakeng tsa diofisiri tsa setereke le diSMT. Kgothalletso e tswang leseding le fumanweng ke hore ho lokela ho tla ka mawa a tlatsetso a ho matlafatsa merero ya maemo a tshohanyetso ao setereke se kopanang le oona le ho matlafatsa tshebetso ya sistimi kaofela ho atleha ho tshehetsa diSMT tsa dikolo tsa poraemari. Mawa ana a kenyeletsa ho matlafatsa diSMT ka ho tswella ho ntshetsa pele tsebo ya bona ka ho ithuta bokgoni bo botjha ka mekgwa e kang dikopano tsa boitjhoriso, botataisi, jj le ho kgothalletsa tshebedisano e matla le diofisiri tsa setereke. Ho fumanoe hore batsamaisi ba liofisi tsa mafelo a sa laolang mathata a fumanoeng ba ka tsamaisa mekhoha e betere, ho ntlafatsa lits'ebetso tsa molao le ho fana ka tsebo bakeng sa ho etsa liqeto litekong tsa sekolo le tsa setereke. Ho feta moo, diphetoho tsa tshebetso maamong a porovense le a naha Lefapheng la Thuto ya Motheo di bohlokwa ho netefatsa hore ho ba le matitjhere, disebediswa le dintho tse ding tsa bohlokwa tse lekaneng le ho kgothalletsa hore ho be le tswelopele e kgonang ho tshwarella nako e telele dikolong.

Mantswe a bohlokwa: Diofisiri tsa setereke, dihlopha tsa matitjhere a tataisang boetapele sekolong, tshehetso, dikolo tsa poraemari, dikarolo tse bapalwang le maikarabelo a ba bapalang dikarolo tseo, diphepetso/mathata.

OPSOMMING (in Afrikaans)

Hierdie studie ondersoek distriksamptenare se rolle en verantwoordelikhede in die ondersteuning van skoolbestuurspanne (SBS'e) in die Johannesburg-Noord-distrik. Die oorgang van apartheid na Suid-Afrika se huidige demokratiese bedeling het 'n noemenswaardige uitwerking op die land se opvoedingstelsel gehad. Ingevolge die inwerkingtreding van die Suid-Afrikaanse Skolewet van 1996 het die daarstelling van opvoedingsdistrikte aanspreeklikheid op skoolvlak verbeter. Gevolglik het kurrikulumbestuur in hul aangewese skole die verantwoordelikheid van die distrikskantore geword. Ten spyte van hierdie ontwikkelinge, word distriksamptenare se ondersteuning aan SBS'e in laerskole dikwels as onvoldoende ervaar, met skoolhoofde wat kringbestuurders identifiseer as die minste doeltreffend om skoolleiers by te staan. 'n Kwalitatiewe benadering is gevolg om distriksamptenare se rolle en verantwoordelikhede te bestudeer. 'n Gevallestudieontwerp wat in die interpretivistiese paradigma onderlê is, is gebruik om die menings, ervarings en perspektiewe van 23 navorsingsdeelnemers – bestaande uit SBS-lede en distriksamptenare, van drie laerskole in die Johannesburg-Noord-distrik – te ondersoek. Die data-insamelingstegnieke wat gebruik is, sluit halfgestruktureerde individuele en fokusgroeponderhoude, vraelyste en dokumentontleding in. Gelei deur die Algemene-stelsels-teorie (GST), beklemtoon die studie dat distrikskantore en skole, as substelsens, inherent van mekaar afhanklik is en gesamentlik eerder as in isolasie funksioneer. Deur tematiese ontleding is patrone en temas wat na vore kom, in die databronne geïdentifiseer. Die bevindinge dui daarop dat skole se doeltreffendheid afhang van die doelmatigheid van die SBS'e, wat aktief deur distriksamptenare ondersteun word. Uitdagings soos kommunikasiekwessies en hulpbronbeperinge beïnvloed die distriksamptenare se kapasiteit om SBS'e doeltreffend te ondersteun, en dit lei tot verskille in die gehalte van die ondersteuning wat aan SBS'e gegee word. Die studie het egter onthul dat geteikende ondersteuning – deur professionele leergemeenskappe (PLCs), leieronderwyser-werkswinkels en digitale platforms – gehelp het om hierdie uitdagings te temper. Hierdie navorsing dra tot die bestaande literatuur oor opvoedingsbestuur by deur die komplekse verhouding tussen distriksamptenare en SBS'e uit te wys. 'n Aanbeveling wat uit die bevindinge voortspruit, is dat bykomende strategieë ondersoek moet word om distrikte se gebeurlikheidsbeplanning te versterk en om algehele sistemiese funksionering te verbeter met die oog op meer doeltreffende ondersteuning van laerskole se SBS'e. Dit

sluit die bemagtiging van SBS'e deur deurlopende professionele ontwikkeling en handhawing van sterker samewerkingsbande op distriksvlak, in. Vindings dui daarop dat bestuurders van distriksamptenare wat die gevonde uitdagings aanspreek, kan lei tot verbeterde praktyke, beter beleidsvorming en die inligting van besluitneming op skool- en distriksvlak. Verder is sistemiese hervormings op die provinsiale en nasionale vlakke van die Departement van Basiese Onderwys (DBO) noodsaaklik om voldoende hulpbronne te verseker en om skoolverbetering oor die lang termyn te bevorder.

Sleutelwoorde: Distriksamptenare, skoolbestuurspanne (SBS'e), ondersteuning, laerskole, rolle en verantwoordelikhede, uitdagings.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

CM	-	Circuit Manager
DBE	-	Department of Basic Education
DCES	-	Deputy Chief Education Specialist
DP	-	Deputy Principal
FP	-	Foundation Phase
GDE	-	Gauteng Department of Education
GST	-	General Systems Theory
IDSO	-	Institutional Development and Support Officer
Inter-Sen	-	Intermediate and Senior Phase
LoLT	-	Language of Learning and Teaching
LSEN	-	Learners with Special Education Needs
PAM	-	Personnel Administrative Measures
PED	-	Provincial Education Department
PLC	-	Professional Learning Committee
SES	-	Senior Education Specialist
SGB	-	School Governing Body
SMT	-	School Management Team
SOP	-	Standard Operating Procedure
QMS	-	Quality Management System

CHAPTER 1: ORIENTATION TO THE STUDY

1.1 INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Schools serve as the primary site for learning and teaching in communities, and school districts play an important role in promoting learners' learning and success. For this reason, effective schools are central to the optimal development of learners (Naidoo, 2019). With the implementation of the South African Schools Act (1996), the responsibilities of the administration of schools have been delegated to individual school management. Essentially, the principal, as part of the school management team (SMT), accounts for the state and overall performance of the school; this is an ample task. To support this statement, Naidoo (2019, p. 23) states that "*Principals usually perform three interchangeable functions at the school level. As managers, they focus on managing and controlling human, physical, and financial resources*". As leaders, principals steer the mission of the institution and focus on organisational growth and school improvement. As administrators, principals manage day-to-day operational matters and constantly alternate between leadership and management roles (Chabalala & Naidoo, 2021; Naidoo, 2019). From this extract, scholars can appreciate that the role of the SMT, which is inclusive of departmental heads of phases and deputy principals working hand-in-hand with the principal, is crucial to the performance standard of the school.

Delving deeper into the management of schools in South Africa, the district office serves as the intermediary between the school sites and the Department of Basic Education's provincial offices. In this way, the reader can observe that power has been decentralised and delegated by provinces. McKinney (2009) and the DBE (2025) further explain the term 'district' as referring to an administrative subdivision of the provincial head office. Bantwini and Moroosi (2017) further emphasised that the mission of the Provincial Department of Education (PDE) included the training of both district officials and their school managers.

Similarly, the district officials who monitor and support SMTs and the staff team at large, namely, senior education specialists, Institutional Development and Support Officers (IDSO), and circuit managers, are tasked with ensuring that SMTs are well equipped to deliver quality education experience to their clientele - the learners.

The expectation, then, as the Department of Basic Education (DBE) 2013/2014 report explains, is that district offices are tasked with working jointly with and supporting principals

(DBE, 2021). As the DBE states, education districts should collaborate while supporting school leaders to accomplish the goal of learners' right to excellent education (DBE, 2026). Given that district officials are office-based educators and that SMT members are school-based educators, there should be common ground and fluid communication. However, in contrast to the latter ideal, in the South African schooling context, teachers often echo the sentiment of SMTs, particularly because schools are inadequately serviced by their district offices. Bantwini and Moroosi (2017, p. 1) reported the following: "*Findings show school principals' dissatisfaction with their districts' low levels of support caused by the lack of district support on the provision of resources, lack of consultation in key decisions involving their schools; district officials' lack of visibility in schools...*"

Managers often face a range of challenges, from changes in policy to competing demands and a lack of resources (Gaim et al., 2018). Bantwini and Diko (2011) highlight that district officials are not fairly capacitated to manage a range of 200-500 schools and their teachers. Conversely, the challenges faced by district officials in accomplishing the goal of school effectiveness may be multifaceted, and understanding these problems is essential for improving district-level support for schools.

Another factor, pointed out by Bantwini (2019), was the dissemination of curriculum reform to teachers for implementation in schools and following up to ensure implementation, despite the lack of resources to carry out these tasks. Furthermore, Cibane (2020) emphasises that the task of continuous professional development of SMTs and teachers is a strenuous task. More especially, the task of administering underperforming schools, as principals noted communication gaps that resulted from the top-down approach, which district officials regrettably take on to attain improvement in schools (Cibane, 2020).

This phenomenon is commonly found in South African education literature on the basis of the views of principals and teachers (Bantwini, 2019). In contrast, this study focuses on the perspectives of district officials in Johannesburg North of Gauteng Province, South Africa, with an emphasis on the challenges they face in effectively supporting primary schools and how these obstacles affect district relations with SMTs.

1.2 RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY

The rationale of this study provides justification for its importance. This study accounts for the roles and responsibilities of district officials and the challenges they encounter. Consequently, the study justifies the strategies implemented to ensure the delivery of school effectiveness as a core duty of district officials.

The DBE (2021) outlines the duties and responsibilities of district offices to their schools, including assisting schools concerning the compilation of school improvement and development plans, providing a conducive environment for focused support in the schools, and prioritising the institutions that are in the greatest need.

The researcher, as an SMT member, more specifically a departmental head (DH), experienced a school context in which the principal's post had been left vacant for years without an official appointment in this pivotal role. Consequently, the deputy principal's undertaking of the principal's role without orientation or support, while leaving the deputy principal's office vacant, placed the standing SMT members under immense pressure. Furthermore, three DH positions had yet to be occupied, which resulted in many acting DHs and deputy principals rotating for the said posts over several years. The SMT underwent neglect from the district, as positions were unadvertised and vacant; moreover, assistance and support were not readily available from the district office. This experience highly opposes the DBE's (2021) policy and is evident in the demands widely faced by inundated SMTs and the lack of support claimed to be received from their district offices.

This deficiency in support brings attention to the possible difficulties and challenges faced by district offices, which are unknown to SMTs. In parallel, Raath's (2013) research into the relationships between SMTs and districts revealed that the data revealed mostly negative experiences between the two units. Schimdt-Davis (2010, as cited in Bantwini, 2019) emphasises that principals cannot be held accountable when the district is not held accountable for its role in supporting school effectiveness. In accordance with DBE (2021) policy, the district, supported by its circuit offices, is expected to be a helping hand to schools by facilitating planning, supporting, monitoring, oversight, and accountability. However, South African literature is rich in teachers and SMTs at large, sharing the resounding sentiment that, in many cases, the majority of contact with district officials has been with regard to being held to account for performance without due assistance. The main complaint was that the measure of monitoring far outweighed the support provided.

By conducting this research, the reasons for the disconnect between office-based and school-based educators were obtained. Furthermore, the study attempted to create meaningful connections between the two to better empower districts, incorporate teacher feedback into the planning of the district's role, and likewise effectively counter the detachments between districts and schools to enhance their opportunities to improve the school environment.

As Bantwini (2019) further postulates, this disconnect highlights the need to examine districts more directly, as some contextual factors affecting effective schooling may be within districts' offices. The benefit of conducting this particular study was to explore the roles and responsibilities of various district officials in advancing the bridging of the prolonged inadequacies of the system, especially the support given to SMTs to ensure effective schooling for its recipients, namely, the learners.

1.3 PROBLEM STATEMENT

The support given to SMTs in primary schools by district officials has been inadequate (Bantwini & Moorosi, 2018). Bantwini and Moorosi (2018) asserted that circuit managers have been identified by principals as the most deficient in assisting school leaders. In South Africa, a large body of literature has been carried out on institutions of basic education suffering from matters ranging from chronic teacher and learner truancy and a low rate of time spent on tasks, uninvolved parents or guardians, a lack of learning and teaching support materials (LTSM), ineffectually utilised contact time, teachers inundated with paperwork and admin, infrequent monitoring and support of learners' work and progress (Beasley, 2020; Teach Thought, 2021). These factors have resulted in the educational body being unable to deliver quality teaching and learning opportunities, negative school climates, and the inability to produce the necessary standard of learner performance, ultimately resulting in ineffective schools.

More alarmingly, as highlighted by Bantwini (2019), the GET band was neglected by the district, as reported by some teachers. The inadequate standard of teaching and learning has raised questions about the district's role in supporting schools beyond school visits. Additionally, teachers and SMTs report insufficient monitoring and limited support (Bantwini, 2019). McKinney (2009, p. 3) added, "*While there seems to be a consensus that districts can only successfully influence school reform if the improvement of teaching and learning at*

the classroom and school level is central to their work, there is little evidence of this kind of focus in the current role and functioning of districts in South Africa”.

Furthermore, Bantwini and Moroosi (2017) emphasise that the success of SMTs is relatively dependent on the nature of the support received from their districts. Thus, the understanding is that the role of the district is to support the SMT to effect changes in schools and improve the standard of teaching and learning. If this success is not realised, the SMT cannot be solely accountable. The latter point suggests that *“District offices, as the hub of support for schools, are expected to exert an effort to raise the standards and the quality of education provision”* (Ngwenya, 2017, p. 4). A participant of a previous study drew attention to the paradox in that *“...school-based educators blame the educators at the district level for poor planning, lack of support and monitoring, as well as feedback”* (Rikhotso, 2014, p. 3). As evident from past research, the current issue that necessitated this research is that of schools needing the quality of schooling to be improved. School improvement is the partial responsibility of the district, as the district office must capacitate SMTs with the necessary tools and facilities to perform their duties and responsibilities effectively within their context, which they seemingly lacked.

The knowledge gap presented was between the teacher’s perspective and the district’s and/or district officials’ perspectives and the obstacles they faced. Similarly, as highlighted by Bantwini (2019) upon analysis, the data showed that some officials had an idea of how to support principals, but, unfortunately, failed due to a lack of support from district offices and upper structures. The latter indicated that district offices may not have been well-equipped to support their staff in curriculum delivery and the work of principals. To be more precise, the sentiments, grievances, and needs of school-based educators who are the foot soldiers and engines of the education system should not be minimised, isolated, or stigmatised but rather openly received, accounted for, and addressed by supervisors, who have the influence to impact decision-making bodies.

Rikhotso (2014) further asserts that, according to Norms and Standards for Educators (2004), if districts serve schools by providing professional support, teachers can be fully trained in their roles as mediators of learning, designing support work and materials, and effectively and inclusively assessing learners of all needs.

In this way, the district’s role should be first and foremost to support teachers and SMTs to aid them in executing their functions better and then secondarily to monitor. In other words,

districts should be accountable not only to the head office but also to the schools they serve as well. The DBE (2026) emphasises this statement, which prescribes that within districts, the main responsibility is to support the school and its staff and parents. District officials are required to work collaboratively with SMTs to promote effective schooling and counter all the abovementioned ills within schools. Within this widely held view, Bantwini (2019) argued against the portrayal of districts as perpetrators of top-down culture, as they are victims of it themselves, adding that their role is seemingly relaying instructions.

1.4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The gap in the research and literature, as identified by the researcher and problem statement, led to the formulation of the main question, and the research sub-questions were derived from the major notions found within the main question.

1.4.1 Main Question

What are the roles and responsibilities of district officials in supporting primary school management teams in Johannesburg North District?

1.4.2 Sub-questions

1. What are the roles and responsibilities of various district officials toward primary school management teams in Johannesburg North District?
2. How do district officials support primary schools in Johannesburg North District?
3. What are the challenges district officials encounter in supporting primary school management teams in Johannesburg North District?
4. What strategies do district officials use to address the challenges they encounter?

1.5 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1.5.1 Aim of the Study

This study aimed to explore the roles and responsibilities of district officials in supporting primary school management teams in Johannesburg North District.

1.5.2 The Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study were as follows:

- To explore the roles and responsibilities of district officials toward primary school management teams in Johannesburg North District.
- To determine how district officials support primary schools in Johannesburg North District.
- To understand the challenges district officials encounter in supporting primary school management teams in Johannesburg North District.
- To establish strategies that district officials use to address the challenges they encounter.

1.6 LITERATURE REVIEW

A literature review creates a link between the research problem and the existing body of knowledge (Macmillan & Schumacher, 2014). The study explores the recent literature related to the roles and responsibilities of district officials and the challenges they face in effectively supporting SMTs. This exploration is carried out by forming a connection between identifying the main barriers and exploring both intrinsic and extrinsic barriers that district officials may face in successfully assisting their SMTs. Furthermore, this exploration of the literature is achieved while exercising the most relevant, yet recent, literature available by following a narrative structure. This review provides the basis for data collection and analysis.

1.6.1 Levels of Support in Schools

The roles and responsibilities of DHs include controlling the quality of teaching and learning, assessments, and administrative tasks, among other duties, in line with the Employment of Educators Act 76 (1998). DHs of the various phases in schools thrive with the support and guidance of deputy principals (DPs), who work hand-in-hand with principals. However, principals also need guidance and support for the school to be compliant and excel in the sphere of school effectiveness. They report to deputy principals, who are the drivers of the curriculum and meet with parents regarding the progress of learners' work. Amongst the duties of the deputy principal's role is handling disciplinary and operational matters while standing in for the principal in their absence. The deputy principal of the school works

together with the principal to oversee administration, and quality teaching standards are met while working with the community and supporting extramural activities, as indicated by the DBE (2021).

It is apparent that SMTs ultimately rely on guidance from senior education specialists, circuit managers (CMs), and IDSOs for various matters at the school level. The role of district officials, as the key support structure of schools, indicates the responsibility of conducting monitoring and providing support to ensure that schools reach the maximum point of function, as highlighted by the DBE (2021).

In contrast, with the implementation of national policies and provincial legislation, in addition to specific individual school policies, schools have been shown to vary in the receipt of support from district offices, which are meant to mediate policies and reinforce the school's implementation efforts. Ideally, schools provide academic, special needs, emotional, and behavioural support to their learners and teachers; thus, school management needs to be reinforced with the required skills and means to do so effectively. In 2001, Education White Paper 6 (EWP6) introduced a school-level approach to support teaching and learning in full-service schools (FSS). This meant that district-based support teams (DBST), senior education specialists, principals, teachers, general assistant staff, parents, and learners (in some cases) were grouped to form a team from various divisions called an institutional level support team (ILST).

Notably, Makhalemele and Nel (2021) postulate that a key element of successful support teams is their ability to collaborate with different stakeholders. However, the effectiveness of ILSTs was significantly weakened because of poor conflict resolution management and district officials being excluded from some decisions. This indicated the need to review the relationships within ILSTs to ensure that learners receive quality service from their schools. Similarly, the relationship between school managers and district officials affects the performance of a school. The district officials are the main support structure for schools; as such, when the managers within a school seek guidance from one another yet are still found wanting, they look to district officials for assistance.

1.6.2 The Need for District Officials in Schools

When postulating the functions of 'staff caretakers' of the 19th century in Russia, Ibneyeva and Shakirova (2021) indicated that their primary obligation was to monitor the activities of

teachers and the quality of education by means of visiting schools. Furthermore, as Ibneyeva and Shakirova (2021) assert, this role is critical in school administration processes. Thus, the role of district officials in schools has clearly been essential to the education system's vitality in many contexts for a prolonged period of time.

Similarly, Makhalemele and Nel (2021) highlight that in the preceding South African dispensation, support for learners at full-service schools was, for the most part, managed by district offices and exclusively for white learners. However, in the new dispensation, there is no more exclusivity; instead, schools now manage their own support for learners with the facilitation and aid of district officials.

Moreover, Parry (2022) reports that schools experienced an increase in the percentage of their learners seeking mental health services at school. Likewise, an upward trajectory was observed in staff reporting concerns about their learners' presenting anxiety and depression symptoms since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic (Parry, 2020). The need for district officials in schools rose as school managers had at times exhausted all the resources available to them to assist one another and their teachers. This further compels DBSTs to be of greater service and presence in schools. That is, it highlights that the district's role is holistic and integral to the education system in its entirety and not solely focused on curriculum and governance.

For this reason, Beasley (2020) highlights the deficiencies in the demand and supply relationships between districts and their schools. As a result, Beasley (2020) further suggests that district officials find inclusive solutions to aid schools while ensuring that their objectives and accountability are effectively and sustainably maintained. Similarly, Smith et al. (2020) observe a parallel occurrence abroad in the United States of America, as a studied central office shifted from a supervisory, compliance-driven approach toward a consultative relationship with its schools. Collaborative methods of working have been proven to allow changes called for to begin permeating schools. Smith et al. (2020) recommend that school districts cultivate a learning culture among their leaders to strengthen their efforts.

Similarly, according to Reckler (2022), a Californian school district further highlighted that running a district requires a large number of logistics and that staff are often underappreciated, in that their functions are taken for granted by the public. The level of support presented in schools indicates that districts are aware of schools' needs, yet

bridging the gap in supplying the needs proves challenging, regardless of the nation in context, a greater call for support from and collaboration with district officials still stands.

1.6.3 Defining the Roles and Responsibilities of District Officials

Numerous studies define the district as the primary administrative office, representing the Provincial Education Department responsible for overseeing multiple schools. The district office's responsibilities include overseeing leadership and administration, human resource management, finances and budgeting, curriculum instruction, learner enrolment, and ordinary and learners with special educational needs (LSEN) services. These district office functions are confirmed by the DBE Guide on Developing District Reports (2013). "*District role and responsibilities are developed based on the pillars of planning, support, oversight and accountability, as well as public engagement*" (DBE, 2013, p. 12). Support thus refers to the establishment and upkeep of healthy associations with schools and principals to empower the management of schools. Nevertheless, the need to understand the responsibilities of district officials is pivotal to holding officials accountable and assisting them in effectively performing their roles. The role of the district in relation to schools is mainly to provide reinforcement to learning and teaching via classroom observations during school visits and further corroboration through interactions by means of feedback reports and consultations, as specified by Deliwe and Seabe (2022). In other words, the objective of the National DBE is for its district offices to actively play a vital role in the attainment of quality instruction and learning in schools and to perform as essential role players in effective schooling.

1.6.4 History and Evolution of Posts

The 1994 transition of the South African schooling system signalled the development from a centralised to a decentralised system of education management in the country (De Villiers & Pretorius, 2011). DuPlessis and Heystek (2020) alluded to De Grauwe (2004), who explained that schools gained more autonomy, and as a result, a need for an increased level of support from their local district offices arose. DuPlessis and Heystek (2020) postulate that, to support schools allocated to them sufficiently, the district office needs to have meaningful information and utilise it to address a means to assist individual schools rather than take a blanket approach across all schools.

In contrast, the current prevalent situation, as investigated by Bantwini and Moroosi (2018), showed that district offices lack the basic tools to perform their duties fruitfully, such as printers and transportation, which are instrumental to school visits and essential in ensuring that officials can carry out their functions successfully. This practice shows a lack of alignment between the policy and the existing situation. Moreover, contextual challenges are apparent in that the high vacancy rate resulted in certain districts functioning without CMs.

1.6.5 Allocation of District Officials to Schools

With respect to the allocation of schools, DuPlessis and Heystek (2020) explain functions within schools with a focus on external accountability structures and that these structures should be centred on capacity-building (Fullan & Watson, 2005). This means that the district's functions should be centred on strengthening SMTs by educating and empowering them, thus alluding to a need to have a proportionate number of schools in which this ideal would be feasible for districts to attain. For this reason, this study takes a closer look at the staffing within district offices and district officials' designations to schools.

District offices include district directors who are directly answerable to the Provincial Education Department's Head of Department (PED HoD). Additionally, district offices have field officers called CMs who work with their professional and support staff to represent the department at school sites and report to the district director. District offices are segmented into five functions, namely, curriculum support, management and governance support, learner support, examination and assessment, and operations. Within a province, there are multiple districts, which are zones mapped out by municipal boundaries according to DBE (2013) policy. The policy also states that a district holds between 75 and 300 schools, including those factors such as staff, geography, and financial implications that may alter these allocations. Furthermore, DBE's (2013) policy maintains that schools distantly located and in areas of poverty are allocated a greater number of district officials. In these specific instances, staffing is determined by the number of learners, teachers, and schools in need of service.

Despite this, Bantwini and Moorosi (2018) assert that an analysis of data showed that CMs were allocated a high number of schools, which is contrary to the DBE (2013) policy stating that no more than 25 schools should be under one jurisdiction. In the same breath, districts were oversized; in other words, many schools were allocated to a single district office. In a

particular instance, three districts were merged without increasing the infrastructure, material, and human resources given to those districts, and CMs were unable to effectively carry out their duties. This has led the researcher to understand that district officials face barriers within their offices that prevent them from successfully addressing the needs of schools and school managers alike. The disproportionate distribution of schools overall revealed that “... *the identified issues and challenges, weakened and compromised the role that should be played by the CMs and their circuit offices*” (Bantwini & Moorosi, 2018, p. 5). The outcome of these investigations revealed that district offices may need similar attention, which schools are calling for.

This is in the form of physical and human resources, orientation and edification, along with overall systematic thinking and collaborative efforts from their education counterparts. Interestingly, office-based educators, including senior education specialists, deputy chief, and chief education specialists, share the same core duties, as outlined by the Occupational Specific Dispensation [OSD] (2007), which include leadership provision to school-based educators, communication with all stakeholders, and financial planning and management. It also highlights strategic planning and transformation, formulating, implementing, and monitoring policies, in addition to job specifications. The district official's job scope further included supporting curriculum delivery and staff development, monitoring the effective management of schools, and ensuring that officials keep themselves abreast of the latest educational research while administering services to schools.

Bantwini and Moorosi (2018) further explain that the DBE (2013) policy mandates that district directors ensure that CMs receive adequate support and resources to accomplish the functions delegated to the office. According to the OSD (2007), the CMs' job description holds the same core functions as other office-based educators do; however, it additionally emphasises managing the support given to schools and fostering an administrative service to schools. The support provided to CMs is crucial, as their level of functioning has a direct effect on the effectiveness of the schools that are allocated to them. Overall, the main aims of district officials' duties are to support SMTs and their school governing bodies (SGBs), to ensure the effective management and governance of schools, and to successfully facilitate curriculum delivery support (Occupational Specific Dispensation, 2007). Moreover, SMTs need support from district officials to address day-to-day responsibilities at schools, more specifically, administrative services and management support, as cited by DBE (2013). The

expectation, therefore, is that the district office be well-equipped to provide facilitation to capacitate and empower SMTs and schools.

1.6.6 District Expectations in Schools and Impact on SMTs and Schools

Naicker and Mestry (2016) emphasise that if interrelationships between the components of a system are feeble, the likelihood of its success is low. This relates to the pivotal relationship between districts and their schools. Deliwe and Seabe (2022) assert that district interactions with schools, such as school visits, are an integral aspect of monitoring and support in the education system; the aftermath of these visits leaves either a negative or positive attitude with school managers. Nevertheless, the content of school visits has been called for to be revised and reinforced beyond merely information dissemination and ensuring policy compliance to reach the new objectives and practices necessary to affect the required growth within SMTs and for overall improvement to be employed in schools.

Additionally, several fissures have been identified by principals at large, namely, practices that speak to policies that are not meaningfully understood by district officials, as they seem to be implemented rapidly for compliance purposes. As a result, school leaders are at times untrained in implementing policy, while districts merely pass on the course of action without further mediation or assistance, considering the varying contexts of schools.

Interestingly, Deliwe and Seabe (2022) postulate that secondary schools surveyed in 2017/2018 had a higher rate of school visits than did primary schools. The author alludes to the National Senior Certificate examinations as the likely reason for the greater number of visits. Similarly, "*Larger, more well-resourced urban schools receive the most visits*" (Deliwe & Seabe, 2022, p.17). This indicates an approach that neglects and fails to serve junior grades and overlooks lower quintile schools serving in less affluent areas, while prioritising results instead of supporting the fundamentals of teaching and learning regardless of the school context. Similarly, as stated by Bantwini and Moorosi (2018), the 'questionable appointments' made to the CMs' posts impacted principals' observations of higher structure personnel. To build on this argument, Bantwini and Moorosi (2018) highlight that with the influence and facilitation of unions, several CMs have been said to attain a position without due merit; furthermore, adding to the challenges experienced by principals and their SMTs negatively affects efforts toward effective teaching and learning at schools.

Moreover, terms such as 'clueless' and 'lacking awareness' have been used by principals to refer to district officials (Bantwini & Moroosi, 2018). Principals further noted that district officials were not aware of the core functions of SGBs or the roles and responsibilities of principals, as highlighted by Bantwini and Moorosi (2018), stressing yet another deficiency in the expectations and impact of district offices.

1.6.7 Ideal Performance Standards Against Reality in Schools

The trends and patterns of past studies exploring district officials' contributions to schools indicate that principals and schools are not adequately supported by their districts. The district's role is seemingly that of monitoring, whereas it should not merely end at this point.

Evidently, as highlighted by Bantwini and Moorosi (2018), many CMs had never experienced principalship before the assumption of their roles. This is concerning, as gaps in knowledge owing to a lack of experience in school management and day-to-day school life are unknown variables; therefore, such district officials cannot help to guide school managers in seeking support. Bantwini and Moorosi (2018) additionally explain that an ideal standard of performance on the part of district officials would borrow from systems thinking (Senge, 2006). This term, systems thinking, refers to the understanding that all facets are part of one organisation and therefore should function systematically, centralising relationships as fundamental for their success. Moreover, systems thinking emphasises fostering the collaborative nature of relationships with the aim of transformation.

In addition, complementing Naicker and Mestry's (2016) argument for a collaborative approach within districts, DuPlessis and Heystek (2020) further emphasise that the notion of distributive leadership in South African schools will be ineffectual and that the Policy for the South African Standard for Principals (2016b) may be an unattainable idealistic policy. That is, within the education system, a hierarchy is prioritised by the show of district officials taking the role of controlling supervisors, as opposed to supporting colleagues, in relation to SMTs. Distributive leadership involves all entities, regardless of the level of leadership, and focuses on expertise rather than hierarchical authority (Thien, 2019). Similarly, Foley and Sigler (2009) assert that smart districts focus on advancing the district by facilitating the specific type of leadership tailored for the context of its schools, thus allowing them to provide all learners under their care with an effective education (Bantwini & Moorosi, 2018).

In addition, DuPlessis and Heystek (2020) emphasise that turnaround leadership calls for leaders who can pinpoint the challenges and endeavour to amend systems and the relationships within them to foster fruitfulness, resulting in effective schooling.

Conversely, as the literature suggests, Dodson (2015) highlights that district offices are not yet at the point where personnel can assume a position equipped with the necessary skills; it has been noted that many require on-the-job learning (Bantwini & Moorosi, 2018). However, this disparity is elaborated upon by CMs, who identify systematic challenges and political interferences as the causes for underperforming districts, again showing that appointments to posts without due merit may be prevalent and directly negatively affect SMTs and schools. Nevertheless, Deliwe and Seabe (2022) explained that between 2011 and 2017, a greater number of schools reported the presence of district officials in schools, ranging from CMs, senior education specialists, and LTSM coordinators, a possible show of functionality improvements within district offices.

In conclusion, reflecting on the literature explored, the view of the researcher is that, ideally, district officials and school managers should work collaboratively. Putting aside the notions of implied hierarchy and instead exercising the principles of distributive leadership and systems thinking as methods of achieving effective teaching and learning in schools, while effectively supporting and empowering SMTs through applying turnaround leadership strategies. The turnaround tactic is valuable to leaders and managers in that their approach to transformation in the educational space can be sharpened and utilised to gain momentum in learning how to make valuable changes that will be sustainable for the education community.

Notably, Bantwini and Moorosi's (2018) view is that policy implementation should be made practical and avoid politicisation. In the same way that turnaround leadership is systemic, from national offices to the application thereof in schools, policies should be user-friendly and useful in the day-to-day of schools and flexible in terms of the varying school context. Bantwini and Moorosi (2018) assert that for this to be put into effect, district officials need to be the drivers of system-wide change and distance themselves from the focus on compliance and control. Rather, the aim is to apply a bidirectional accountability approach (Deliwe & Seabe, 2022) to improve not only schools but also district offices. Identifying the areas where district offices could improve may shed light on the difficulties that district officials may face and possible ways to address these challenges.

1.7 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

As Lederman and Lederman (2015) noted, a theoretical framework explains the relevant theory and enhances the philosophical viewpoint of the study, thus supporting its overall structure. Von Bertalanffy (1968) developed the general systems theory (GST), which explains that complex systems are composed of smaller components. A system's interdependent parts work jointly towards a common goal, as evident in the education sector – the school and office-based educators, learners, parents, and stakeholders share the mutual objective of quality education that cultivates productive citizens. The properties of a system come from the relationships within it. In other words, the standard of performance of schools emanates from the reinforcement provided by other parts of the system, namely, district offices.

This study is within the bounds of the GST. GST is a framework that can be used to understand the interconnectivity of elements within the education system, as the DBE's subsidiary offices and schools are interconnected and interrelated. As observed by Von Bertalanffy (1968), all the subsystems' single parts together form a larger scheme. In the education community, this is marked by many individual schools forming a larger circuit, circuits forming districts, and so on. Similarly, when there is a problem in schools, it often becomes a national issue.

Moreover, it can be argued that a school's performance outcomes are only as good as the support its school managers and teachers have received. For example, if learners cannot read with comprehension, then the system in its entirety has an issue, which needs to be addressed at the national department, going down into schools. Additionally, if district officials are not hands-on in practising their role, school managers may not be aware of the often-altering norms and expectations of provincial and national offices. This shows that all the structures within the system are intertwined and interrelated (Von Bertalanffy, 1968). In other words, schools, district offices, and provincial and national offices share a co-dependent relationship and often interact with one another to adapt and reach equilibrium (Von Bertalanffy, 1968).

1.8 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN

The research methodology focuses on the most suitable tools that were used to carry out the study and is the lens through which the research findings were analysed. The research design shows a plan for how the researcher intended to conduct the study.

1.8.1 Research Design

This study adopted a single case study design involving multiple sites. The purpose of utilising a singular case study design is highlighted by Creswell (2014), who stated that a case study allows for close observation of small groups and individuals. This focus helped to build a rich understanding of their unique characteristics and environment (Creswell, 2014). This design further relates to the study in that it enables an understanding of how obstacles are overcome. Additionally, why do some challenges occur when supporting school managers? This design also aided the researcher in gauging the difference between policy and implementation in practice, among other aspects. Additionally, the inclusion of SMT members strengthened the relevance of utilising a single case study (involving multiple sites) because school managers deal directly with district officials and thus feel the impact of their support or lack thereof. Furthermore, with the use of a singular case study, the researcher ultimately anticipated reaching data saturation.

1.8.2 Research Paradigm

This study adopted the interpretivism paradigm. The selected paradigm was best aligned with this study, as its ontology underlines that reality is socially constructed; therefore, no two realities are identical and are in fact subjective (Creswell, 2014). As anticipated in this study, district officials and school managers had differing perspectives on the support given to schools. In other words, observations of situations are understood through the lens through which we look, as noted by Creswell (2014). Similarly, this study sought to explore the participants' reality through their perspective, as, under the premise of this paradigm, truth is context dependent. This was indicative of the differing perspectives of SMTs from the views held by district officials, for instance, regarding the focus of school visits. Creswell (2014) described the interpretivism paradigm as one that does not see universal laws as applicable to everyone, meaning that individuals develop meaning from their own lived experiences. This led to the study's epistemology, which is rooted in the participants' reality. Their reality must be interpreted to discover the underlying meanings of events such as

school visits, the ratification of learners' results, the process that followed thereafter, and general interactions with the school's management. Kuhn (1977) noted that knowledge should account not only for objective perspectives but also for subjective ones. This stance caters well to this interpretivist study, as Kuhn (1977) added that objective conclusions are founded on the subjective worldviews of participants. Applying Kuhn's (1977) view in this study, the interpretivist paradigm was effectively applied.

1.8.3 Research Approach

The selected research approach was qualitative. The adopted approach meant that the data collected were expressed in words. This approach was beneficial to this particular study because it was an interpretive study. Creswell (2014) indicated that the qualitative approach, being interpretative in nature, aided the researcher in understanding and deducing the social phenomena faced by district officials and school managers. More particularly, from their perspectives as participants in the study. In other words, participants had an opportunity to expansively share their beliefs, motives, and thoughts about the phenomenon being explored, as highlighted by Kumar (2011). This inquiry aimed to ultimately gain deep insights into the lived experiences and challenges of district officials and school managers within the context of their everyday work life in offices and schools. However, another benefit of exercising the qualitative approach was to explore the meanings of the experiences held by the participants (Kumar, 2011). This was achieved by conducting a case study.

1.8.3.1 Research Context

This study was conducted in three primary schools within the Johannesburg North district of Gauteng Province, South Africa. Within an 8-kilometre radius, the three schools, named A, B and C, constituted learners from various cultural and religious backgrounds. The socio-economic status of the learners ranged from child-headed households to dual, middle-income homes. Schools A and C were ordinary public schools, while School B was a full-service school, servicing LSEN. School A was located near an industrial area, while schools B and C were residential.

1.8.3.2 Population and Sampling

1.8.3.2.1 Population

The total population of this study included a total of 23 participants from the Johannesburg North (JN) education district. The first part of the district Cohort (Cohort A) included a CM, an IDSO, and the second district Cohort (Cohort B) included nine senior education specialists (SEs). At the school level (Cohort C), 3 SMT were selected.

1.8.3.2.2 Purposive sampling

The sampling method that was employed in this study was purposive sampling. Purposive sampling is a qualitative research technique, as Palinkas (2015) postulated, wherein a specific group of individuals is selected purposefully. This approach was beneficial to this study, in that this form of sampling is largely exercised to gain information-rich data (Palinkas, 2015). This sampling method was aligned with this study, as the district officials' assemblage of participants was selected based on their role in working closely with SMT members. The SMT members were selected based on the researcher's interaction with SMT members, who repeatedly articulated sentiments toward their discontent regarding inadequate support from district officials. Their roles and responsibilities positioned them to be able to answer and elaborate on the research questions effectively.

Among the three selected SMTs, the principal, a deputy principal, and two DHs completed the school-based cohort. To be more specific, two DHs were selected, that is, one from the foundation phase and one from the intermediate-senior phase. Given that only members of the SMTs were included as participants, general and post-level 1 staff members were excluded from the study. The population of interest in this study referred to the group of individuals from which data were drawn, as stated by Creswell (2014). In summary, the planned constituency of the study comprised samples from schools falling under the Johannesburg North district and district officials from Johannesburg North district offices.

The layout of the designation of the participants sampled is indicated below:

Table 1.1: Sample of the Study

Category	Number of participants
District officials	11
Principals	3
Deputy Principals	3
Departmental Heads	6
Total number of participants:	23

In purposive sampling, participants are selected on the basis that they are deemed most relevant to a particular study (Creswell, 2014). To answer the research question, the selected district officials, together with SMTs, were able to provide the most meaningful insights. The purposive sampling technique was an assistive device because the district officials held both experience and expertise in the areas in question. The selection of school managers was beneficial, as their views provided a diverse perspective when exploring the research question and triangulating the data collected.

The participants were drawn from three schools (schools A, B, and C) in the Johannesburg North district to ensure that the analysis would be exploratory. The district officials and school managers who were participants in the study were identified by interacting with SMT members from schools in the Johannesburg North district. Thereafter, selection was based on their likelihood of being information-rich and holding experience and knowledge relevant to the research topic, as indicated by purposive sampling (Creswell, 2014). The process that followed was that of seeking permission to conduct research by completing a research request form (DBE, 2021) and specifying the identified probable participants.

1.8.4 Instrumentation and Data Collection Techniques

Three methods of data collection were used in this study: interviews, questionnaires, and documentation analysis. The interviews were twofold, as they took place as individual face-to-face semi-structured interviews with district officials – IDSO and CMs. The focus group interviews were conducted with the SMTs from schools A, B, and C. The senior education specialists were required to telephonically complete questionnaires.

Data collection is defined as a process of gathering and analysing accurate data from various sources to find answers to problems and to further evaluate outcomes (Creswell, 2014). Simplilearn (2023) emphasised the prior statement by describing instrumentation as a tool with which to gain data from participants. The researcher used the following methods of data collection: individual interviews, focus group interviews, questionnaires, and document analysis. The instrument that was used included face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with the IDSO and CMs, questionnaires with subject facilitators and focus group interviews with the three groups of SMTs.

1.8.4.1 Interviews

Creswell (2014) explained the interview method by affirming that it is generally unstructured, has few open-ended questions, and has the intent to invite views from participants. However, Creswell (2014) stated that not all participants may be as perceptive and articulate as may be needed. In addition, interviews are a commonly exercised method of collecting information from people, as noted by Montelle et al. (1986) in Kumar (2011). The authors posit that interviews take the form of interviewers asking respondents questions and recording their responses.

This study followed the semi-structured interviewing method, which allowed flexibility in the questions that were asked, the structure of the interview, and the content (Kumar, 2011). The participants were initially contacted telephonically to organise appointments, including time and venue, based on when participants would be available, followed by email confirmation of the appointment set. In this study, interviews occurred in two distinct methods: focus group interviews were conducted with SMT members at schools A, B, and C, whereas individual interviews were conducted with district officials, namely, the CMs and IDSO.

1.8.4.1.1 Face-to-face Interview Process

The semi-structured interviews were designed in such a way that participants could expand on their answers and freely express themselves. This was done without leaving out any information that the participants felt was necessary to add. The semi-structured face-to-face interviews consisted of open-ended questions based on key topics and allowed extensive discussion of areas of interest (Creswell, 2014). Using an interview guide template sourced from Webel et al. (2023), the interviews took place at the location most convenient to the participant. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with two individual district officials. The

location was the participants' work site, which was their office. The appointments were set ahead of time, according to the availability of the participants. The district officials notified the researcher of their separately chosen times and dates. Individual face-to-face interviews were conducted within a duration of 30 minutes, which did not exceed one hour in length.

1.8.4.1.2 Focus Group Interview Process

The focus group dynamic allows participants to express their shared experiences (Kumar, 2011). As such, the focus group interviews allowed participants to encourage one another to share the views and discrepancies they faced. Kumar (2011) specified that focus group interviews usually hold up to eight interviewees in a single group. Kumar (2011) added that this form of interview involves a limited number of semi-structured and open-ended questions. The questions were anticipated to elicit views and opinions from the study's participants (Kumar, 2011).

The focus group interviews were conducted with three separate SMTs – each with one principal, 1 deputy principal, and two departmental heads from the foundation phase and intermediate/senior phase. The three schools were selected based on interactions with the researcher, wherein grievances on the topic of insufficient support from district officials were shared. The researcher communicated with principals of schools A, B, and C in person regarding their SMTs being selected. Following the receipt of their consent, appointments were set by the principals at a time convenient to them and their SMT members. The principals of schools A, B, and C notified the researcher of the chosen time and date and negotiated with fellow SMT members to participate in the focus group interviews.

Using a semi-structured format, the focus group interviews with 12 SMT members of the schools took place at the individual school sites. The duration of the focus group interviews was within the bounds of 60–90 minutes. Moreover, Kumar (2011) highlights that open-ended questions allow respondents' free expression and that, in turn, fundamentally decreases the likelihood of researcher bias.

1.8.4.2 Questionnaires

The senior education specialists cohort of nine district officials participated in a questionnaire. The questionnaire, as a research instrument, was in a telephone interview

format. Using clear and concise questions related to the study's aims and objectives (Creswell, 2014). The questionnaire was developed and administered by the researcher.

1.8.4.2.1 Questionnaire Process

Informed consent forms were issued to the nine identified SESs after they agreed that they would be willing participants. Mediation of the form by explaining the aim of the study and the rights of the participants to withdraw without penalty occurred, and the SESs thereafter signed. The 30-minute, semi-structured questionnaires were conducted telephonically as the SESs work at multiple work sites within a day; therefore, it was the most suitable and convenient format for the participants. The purpose of the questionnaires was to identify the challenges faced by SESs in supporting SMTs and the strategies utilised to overcome them.

1.8.4.3 Document analysis

Data collection included documentation analysis, which included examining job descriptions, management plans, relevant policies, annual reports, memos, handbooks and any other pertinent documentation. In particular, various job descriptions detail the roles and responsibilities of the CMs, senior education specialists, and institutional development and support officers.

1.8.4.3.1 Document Analysis Process

The documents were retrieved by internet searches as well as through inquiries with the participant district officials for any relevant, additional documents available to them. These documents assisted in reaching a fuller understanding of the officials' roles and responsibilities, as per the upper structure – provincial office and the DBE's expectations.

As defined by Bowen (2009), document analysis is a method in which primary and secondary sources are interpreted to give meaning. Bowen (2009) continued by adding that, as a qualitative research process, it incorporates coding document contents into similar themes. Kumar (2011) detailed the method of document analysis by noting that during the research process, the collection of qualitative documents as written evidence is an assistive device. However, the use of this method has some cons because some information may be protected and thus unavailable for public perusal.

The researcher analysed the documents by referring to Kumar's (2011) basic outline of the steps in the guidance of analysing the documents, which are to list resources, organise information through grouping similar information, make notes, and ensure authenticity. Kumar (2011) emphasises that checking for biases and evaluating the document overall are necessary steps to be followed in the document analysis process and were implemented in this study. Bowen (2009) explains that document analysis can be used as a means to triangulate data retrieved from other forms of qualitative data.

1.8.4.4 Data Analysis and Interpretation

Creswell (2014) explains data analysis as a summary of collected data. Additionally, he illustrated it as a system of applying techniques to describe and evaluate data. Upon further explanation, Creswell (2014) postulates that the form of analysis used is determined by the specified qualitative approach. As this study employed the case study approach, thematic analysis was utilised to interpret the data collected. Thematic analysis, as stated by Creswell (2014), delves into looking at patterns of meaning in a set of data; in this instance, the data were individual and focus group interview transcripts and questionnaires.

First, a secondary cellular device with a speech-to-text application was utilised to record and help transcribe the interactions of participants during individual and focus group interviews. Subsequently, the gathering of sources followed by organising information according to the consistency of topics launches the process (Creswell, 2014). As such, the process of identifying themes, patterns, and relationships in the collected data included sorting, categorising data, and then interpreting the data. Thus, the data analysis in this study took the form of thematic analysis.

Following Clarke and Braun's (2013) data analysis process, familiarisation with the data collected led to the generation of codes. The codes were then combined into themes, which were thereafter reviewed. The significance of the themes was determined and applied to report the findings. Kumar (2011) emphasised ensuring authenticity; to check for biases and assess the overall data, these steps were followed in the thematic analysis process. Findings from the document analysis were also interpreted, and the findings were triangulated with the interviews.

The themes presented contributed to making sense of the content and, as a result, assisted the researcher in forming meaning from the data collected, as explained by Creswell (2014).

In other words, as stated by Braun and Clarke (2013), following thematic analysis, codes were identified by categorising words and phrases associated with specific concepts using colour coding. These codes were then organised and interpreted to derive meaning for the study.

1.9 RELIABILITY, VALIDITY/CREDIBILITY AND TRUSTWORTHINESS

Research reliability refers to research methods that reproduce the same results repeatedly. Following the recording of the individual and focus group interviews, the transcription repeatedly revealed patterns and themes. This reflected the data saturation the researcher had hoped to attain.

1.9.1 Validity

The external validity of a research study speaks to how true the findings of the study are to individuals in similar contexts to participants outside of the study. According to Andrade (2018), internal validity measures whether the design, conduct, and analysis are unbiased and if the research question was answered. The validity of this study was checked by pretesting the understandability of the questions (Johnson, 2019). Kumar (2011) asserts that this is accomplished by sharing a draft of the interview questions with a similar group and setting to the actual respondents. This is done to identify possible problems or barriers that respondents may find in understanding the meaning of the questions.

1.9.2 Credibility

The credibility of the study measures the truth of whether the findings are accurate. Moreover, member checking was conducted to ensure the integrity of the findings. Member checking refers to the post-interview practice of showing the participants the transcript of the interview conducted with them to verify that the transcription is indeed truthful. Creswell (2012) explains that confirmability measures the degree to which the outcomes of the research can be confirmed by other researchers in the field and confirms that the represented findings are indeed derived from valid data.

1.9.3 Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness refers to the level of confidence, interpretation, and methodology utilised to ensure quality in a study (Pilot & Beck, 2014). The responsibility of the researcher was to ensure that all the data represented was accurate and unbiased. This was to ensure that all

the findings of the study were just, sound, and reliable. Furthermore, the participants were content with the process of data collection and affirmed that their views were accurately presented.

1.10 RESEARCH ETHICS

1.10.1 Informed Consent

Within the bounds of research ethics is anti-plagiarism. As observed by Kumar (2011), a study must disprove the ill practice of using another's work as one's own; this study honoured said bounds and cited all used material. Kumar (2011) emphasises that informed consent is another facet of ethics and that all participants participate voluntarily.

1.10.2 Respect for Autonomy

The participants were asked to sign a consent form to participate in the study, and no participant was forced to participate. The onus was on the researcher to communicate and make it clear that the participants could withdraw from the study at any point without penalty.

1.10.3 Non-maleficence

In this study, the identities of all participants remained anonymous; in other words, they remain private, and any other personal information will remain confidential to protect participants from any exposure or harm, as stated by Kumar (2011). Pseudonyms have been used to conceal the identities of districts, schools, and participants.

1.10.4 Protection of Data

The data collected will also remain confidential and will only be available to the researcher and supervisor. The data are stored safely in a cloud in the researcher's Google OneDrive and DropBox for a period of five years and can thereafter be discarded.

1.10.5 Permission to Conduct Research

Creswell (2014) states that ethics in research are necessary to protect the integrity of the study and its participants and further encourages the researcher to anticipate and actively address ethical issues in the research plan. Cacciattolo (2015) explains that ethical research is committed to ensuring that data collection approaches abide by the professional

code of conduct and participant safety. Furthermore, the researcher ensured that in conducting the study, the principles and values of the university's policy on research ethics were upheld. Additionally, an application for ethical clearance was sent by the researcher's supervisor to the Ethics Review Committee for approval. The researcher subsequently sought ethical clearance from the ethics office at the university where the study was registered to conduct it. This study received ethical clearance certification on the 8th of May 2024 as a low-risk study.

1.10.6 Research Merit and Integrity

The researcher obtained permission from the Gauteng Department of Education (GDE) and approval from the schools to gain access to the sites (Creswell, 2014). As highlighted by DBE (2021), a research request form is available both online and in district offices to seek permission to conduct research with stakeholders. This form was completed and submitted with the attached approved research proposal and a draft of the interview questions to be answered by officials (DBE, 2021). In this way, the GDE allowed the researcher to seek relevant and willing stakeholder permission to interview particular officials. According to Creswell (2014), familiarity with the code of ethics within the profession assisted the researcher in abiding by ethical practices.

1.11 LIMITATIONS AND DELIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Kumar (2011) noted that the limitations of the study are potential restrictions faced by the researcher when conducting the study. Similarly, Price and Murnan (2004) alluded to the limitations of the study as factors that constrained the researcher's ability to make generalisations and interpretations from findings. Examples included time constraints to conduct interviews as the researcher, district officials, and SMTs share the same fixed work hours; thus, availability was limited. Second, the small sample size may not necessarily reflect the reality of all district officials and SMTs outside of the study area.

In the discourse of limitations and delimitations, Kumar (2011) signifies that delimitations entail addressing the researcher's intended narrowed scope of the study. As such, availability times were arranged through mutual communication and agreement, within a school term, after school hours. Individual face-to-face interviews (with the CM and IDSO) and focus groups (with the three SMTs) were specifically selected to gain insight into their

various roles. Data collection was carried out at the various participants' work sites during work hours to avoid inconvenience to participants, thus optimising their input.

The questionnaires were administered via telephone during the senior education specialists' available time. Owing to financial and travel restraints, the study did not include districts beyond the Johannesburg North district.

1.12 DEFINITION OF THE KEY CONCEPTS

- **District officials:** In this study, district officials refer to officially appointed employees of the district office, a subsidiary of the provincial directorate. They provide a line of communication between provincial departments and schools (DBE, 2021). In this study, we take a closer look at these specific officials and their roles: Senior Education Specialists, Institutional Development and Support Officials, and CMs. Their responsibilities range from guiding teachers in the delivery of the curriculum to the operational governance of schools (DBE, 2021).
- **School Management Teams:** In this study, SMT refers to the concept of SMTs, as stated by Van Wyk and Marumoloa (2012), which was embedded in the *South African Schools Act 84 of 1996*, when the management of schools was decentralised from the government into individual schools.
- **Primary School:** In South Africa, the term 'primary' school is used to refer to schools offering grades R to 7, where literacy and mathematical skills are established (DBE, 2021)
- **Principal:** In this study, the principal refers to the teacher appointed as the head of a school; the principal accounts for academic performance as part of the nine focus areas of a school (DBE, 2021). According to the *Employment of Educators Act 76 of 1998*, the principal represents the provincial Department of Education's Head of Department within the school.
- **Deputy Principal:** In this study, the deputy principal refers to the individual whose primary role is to steer the curriculum and support the principal in managing the school. According to the *South African Schools Act 84 of 1996*, a further description of the duties entails standing in for the principal in their absence. Moreover, administrative procedures concerning the activities and functions of the school should be maintained.

- **Departmental Heads:** Formerly labelled as Heads of Department (HoDs), the DBE has since amended the title to DHs. In this role, DHs ensure that, within their phase (Foundation, Intermediate, Senior, or Further Education and Training), they manage the administration processes within their department/phase (DBE, 2021).
- **Support:** In this study, support is referred to as the provision of care and upkeep to curriculum matters and school governance. The decentralisation of school management, which is the responsibility of individual SMTs, necessitates assistance and guidance from upper structures such as district offices. The job of the SMT is difficult and increasingly multifaceted as a result of increased stress and liability. As such, district office roles include supporting school managers in effectively executing their duties when fellow school managers are not able to guide them. DBE (2021) states that district offices are key players in meeting the needs of school managers.
- **Challenges:** Challenges pertaining particularly to this study include obstacles and difficulties that SMTs and district officials tend to face in their journey toward school effectiveness. Bantwini (2014) added that these factors may at times hinder the overall performance of both SMTs and district officials.
- **School Effectiveness:** For a school to meet the standards of being deemed an effective school, certain criteria are highlighted. In this study, Botha (2010) alludes to several criteria, including overall learner performance, conditions that allow a quality approach to teaching, and teachers' time spent on tasks. Furthermore, an orderly, secure environment, strong educational leadership, and high expectations for learners are needed (Botha, 2010). The evaluated expectations of effective schools highlight the regular assessment of learner progress and the acquisition of basic skills.

1.13 CHAPTER OUTLINE

Chapter 1: Orientation of the study

Chapter 1 provides an introduction and overview of the study. The study's introduction and background outline the purpose of the research. Additionally, the research problem, research questions, aim, and objectives are within the discourse.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Chapter 2 focuses on presenting a review of recent literature, which reinforces the study by evaluating existing literary works. This chapter focuses on the history of the role of district officials and their current locus, purpose and demand in schools. The theoretical framework of the study is also discussed.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

Chapter 3 presents the design and methodology employed in the study. In addition, the data collection instrumentation and population and sampling of this qualitative study are addressed.

Chapter 4: Data analysis and discussion of findings

Chapter 4 presents a comprehensive discussion of the findings and an in-depth analysis of the data collected during the research. The literature and the theoretical framework were also crucial for interpreting and contextualising the findings, as they provide the foundation for understanding how the results align with the roles and responsibilities of district officials in supporting primary school management.

Chapter 5: Summary, recommendations, and conclusions

Chapter 5 presents a detailed interpretation of the research findings and their implications. By including a discussion of the research results, comparisons are made to similar literature while highlighting the contribution that the study adds to the field. Furthermore, this chapter is inclusive of the limitations of the study and provides recommendations for future studies in the field.

1.14 CONCLUSION

This study is expected to provide context and build an understanding of the roles and responsibilities of district officials. As an exploratory study, this study investigated the challenges that district officials face in supporting SMTs. Prior studies have shown that the support given to SMTs is inadequate. Similarly, with the formulation of Education White Paper 6 (2001), the necessity of district officials' presence in schools has increased, and as shown by previous studies, it has an impact on overall performance in schools.

Thus, the contrast between the support needed and that received by SMTs has been in the spotlight. This gap drove the study to explore the obstacles and hindrances faced by district officials in their various roles and the inevitable impact on SMTs and schools under district officials' care.

The next chapter provides a literature review of the study.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Chapter 1 introduced the background and provided an overview of the key aspects of the study. This chapter (2) reviews the literature on the research topic. This study explores district officials' roles and responsibilities in supporting primary school management teams (SMTs) in Johannesburg North district, Gauteng, South Africa. The literature review links the research problem and the existing body of knowledge (Macmillan & Schumacher, 2014). Nevertheless, this study explores recent literature, both South African and international, related to the roles and responsibilities of district officials and the challenges they face in effectively supporting their SMTs. This will be carried out by forming a connection between identifying the main barriers and exploring both intrinsic and extrinsic barriers that district officials may face in successfully assisting their SMTs. This is achieved by exercising the most relevant, yet recent, literature available by following a narrative structure. This review provides the basis for data collection and analysis.

This study is significant because it contributes to the body of literature by scrutinising the district officials' role in supporting primary school management teams and the obstacles that confront them in doing so. This review of literature is therefore relevant and justified, as all sources, national and international, are strongly related to the research question (Creswell, 2014). The selected sources consequently provide a deeper milieu for this study.

2.2 UNDERSTANDING THE CONCEPT OF DISTRICT OFFICIALS

As Dlungwane (2021) remarks, school districts within the South African context are pivotal in both the management and administrative roles of individual institutions. The definition of district officials, as alluded to by the National Education Policy Act (NEPA) (1996), aims to play a pivotal role in promoting value-based education in schools and ensuring an open line of communication between provincial offices and individual education institutions. Dlungwane (2021) stated that the NEPA (1996) document continues by adding that district officials' role includes working collaboratively with principals and teachers while providing professional support to achieve excellent teaching and learning standards in South African schools.

Dlungwane (2021) and Van Der Voort and Wood (2016) concur with the notion that district officials' role is to ensure effective curriculum dissemination and operation of the school. Herein lies the importance of district officials, which is the functionality of the school, that has a domino effect, so far-reaching into the overall education system nationally and internationally, as previously highlighted.

Additionally, section 195 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996) claims that the role of public servants is inclusive of accountability and efficacy (Dlungwane, 2021). This would imply that an integral underpinning of the duties of district officials would include being of service to their principals and schools by being answerable for their duties and handling their responsibilities with competence and effectiveness.

The literature reveals that, through identified published studies, principals assess the impact of district leadership on the degree of school improvement. Dlungwane (2021) demonstrated that fostering a positive school culture and efforts toward innovation impact a school's teaching and learning standards.

2.3 LEVEL OF SUPPORT IN SCHOOLS

Schools, as the grassroots of the education system, need their resources and methodologies to be reinforced and further capacitated according to their contextual needs (Bantwini & Diko, 2011).

2.3.1 History and Evolution of Posts

The need to capacitate teachers and monitor the dissemination of the curriculum in schools necessitates the presence of education districts. The various roles and responsibilities of district officials are aligned with the critical focal areas of DBE (2015). As an accountability system that focuses on capacity-building to aid the intervention abilities of district officials to support schools, the approach is outcomes-based (DBE, 2015).

With the aim of improving district management, the main characteristics of the focal areas are intended to enhance the skill set of officials. The projected outcomes include the strengthening of school managers; improving internal district planning, management and curriculum interventions; and heightening the participation of the parental body (DBE, 2015).

As illustrated by the Occupational Specific Dispensation [OSD] (2007), school-based educators include post-level 1 (PL-1) teachers and the SMT. The school-based educators are monitored and supported by the office-based educators comprising educational specialists for all primary school phases (Foundation, Intermediate and Senior phases), the institutional development and support officer (IDSO), and the CMs, who oversee good governance practices.

The chain of command continues for Senior and Deputy Chief Education Specialists, who oversee curriculum management and the implementation of mass-based projects (Occupational Specific Dispensation, 2007). These specialists at the district level also ensure that the programmes initiated by provincial education departments (PEDs) are meaningfully implemented in all schools within their designated districts.

At the turn of the millennium, Education White Paper 6 [EWP6] (DoE, 2001) was introduced to the South African education landscape to promote inclusive education. Later, supported by the Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support (SIAS) Policy (DBE, 2014), access to education was mandated to be accessible to all learners, regardless of their cognitive and physical abilities and socio-economic status. As a result, inclusive education is recognised as a right for all learners across schools in South Africa.

Accordingly, the Occupational Specific Dispensation [OSD] (2007) included the specialist services that should be provided to South African learners. This meant that some ordinary schools, all full-service schools, and all learners with special educational needs (LSEN) schools should have their education-related needs catered to by social workers, therapists, and psychologist's services.

Vergottini and Weyers (2022) note that from the perspective of social workers in particular, the school environment has been shown to be an inequitable system, as some provinces are understaffed. However, in different provinces, some practitioners stated that the ratio of learners-in-need to placed social workers was too high for the few practitioners to productively service the schools (Vergottini & Weyers, 2022).

Furthermore, Govender (2024) stated that specialist practitioners, such as psychologists, work within a multi-systemic and multi-collaborative framework to support the inclusive education mandate of the Department of Basic Education (DBE). The broad network within the specialists' functioning suggests the provision of support to teachers, parents, and learners, who require social, emotional, and academic interventions at schools. More

interestingly, Govender (2024) highlighted that psychologists experienced challenges in implementing inclusive education practices at schools; however, these obstacles were specific to each school's setting and context.

A school's academic performance can be directly correlated with the effectiveness of the support given by its district office. This is because of the role of supporting the school principal, and the rest of the school management characterises the duties and responsibilities of district officials (DBE, 2021).

SMTs seek support and guidance from the district office. Despite seeking advice from relevant PEDs, district offices lack the ability to deliver support to schools (Bantwini & Diko, 2011). The figure below shows that the chain of command reveals that district officials are the main source of support for schools.

In South Africa, the Occupational Specific Dispensation [OSD] (2007) for education pertains to a remuneration agreement made for teachers at various levels of expertise. This was created to have a fair and structured pay scale for qualified and registered professionals in the field (DBE, 2008). With this knowledge, the researcher is aware that SMTs are categorised under management, whereas district-appointed officials are categorised as specialists in the education sector.

As stated in the Education Labour Relations Council (ELRC), Draft Collective Agreement of 2007, this legislation was effective from 1st January 2008 and covers all teachers registered with the South African Council for Educators [SACE] (DBE, 2008).

Figure 2.1 below illustrates the level of support offered in South African schools as of 2007, that is, general education, specialist education, and supervisory/management levels. The assemblage includes school-based educators, office-based management for schools, and specialist services.

3. General education, Specialist education and supervisory/management levels

3.1 School based

3.1.1 General Classroom Teaching
Teaching Support
Assistant Teacher (CDW)
Teacher Interns
New Teacher Entrants (First Year fully Qualified Teachers doing Community Service)
Teacher
3.1.2 School Based Specialist
Teacher and Learning Specialist
Senior Teaching and Learning Specialist
3.1.3 Management in Schools
Head of Department
Deputy Principal
Principal

3.2 Office-based

3.2.1 Office-based Management for Schools
Circuit Manager
3.2.2 Office-based Specialist
Education Specialist
Senior Education Specialist
Deputy Chief Education Specialist
Chief Education Specialist

3.3 Specialist Services

Social Worker
Senior Social Worker
Therapists
Senior Therapist
Psychologists
Senior Psychologist

Figure 2.1: Hierarchy of levels of support in schools

Source: Occupational Specific Dispensation (Occupational Specific Dispensation, 2007, pp. 4-5).

2.3.2 Expectations of Stakeholder Roles

Stakeholders are entities that share a common interest and have an impact on the functioning of an organisation (Kettunen, 2015). According to Kettunen (2015), the relationship between stakeholders is pivotal to the effective functioning of any organisation, particularly within schools as organisations wherein stakeholders should have meaningful input.

Similarly, Purnomo, Mansir and Tumin (2020) demonstrated that parents, the community, and the school form a mutually beneficial triad; in other words, these are the stakeholders of the education sector. As the school houses the minds of the next generation, it provides an array of knowledge, skills and values to aid its clients, in turn empowering the community once skills have been acquired. It is therefore clear that schools are indivisible from their surrounding communities (Purnomo et al., 2020).

Recent research has suggested that parental figures' relationships with district offices are 'escalation' in nature (Bantwini & Moorosi, 2018). This means that parents often consider reporting matters solely to the district when processes at the school level aggrieve them.

Alternatively, discord between the parental body and the school district and/or managers can largely hinder the operations and well-being of an institution of learning. Weiss et al. (2018) reported that conflict negatively affects the morale and motivation of stakeholders, thus leading to possible dysfunction of the management systems practised at the school site.

Purnomo et al. (2020) highlighted that parents perceive district offices and the basic education department as agents of change but experience disappointment and then revert to SMTs only at schools. This disconnect is even more apparent when examining the appeal, admissions, and psych-educational assessment processes. Many parents have only interacted with the district on such a basis, which often involves emergency, last resort attempts. Notably, districts do not seem to support parents in any other way (Bantwini & Moorosi, 2018). This means that the district is often considered a non-entity and more commonly forgotten or an under-utilised resource by parents.

The existing accounts of past literature suggest a disconnect between the general parental body and district offices. Further evidence of this phenomenon expands to international studies. Axis (2020) argues that the level of participation of parents, mainly maternal

figures, is centred mostly on fundraising efforts and infrastructural upgrading projects and does not surpass the school level. An additional opportunity for parent stakeholders to be active in decision-making processes is to participate in school governing body (SGB) elections, which appoint parents and school staff members to the council. However, in addition to the SGB, there are multiple other forums and organisations within communities for parent stakeholders to participate in supporting the schooling structure, such as in the Institute of Education (MEDE), as alluded to by Axis (2020).

In applying the curriculum enrichment model, Axis (2020) describes parents who collaborate with teachers, which is an important facet in curriculum decisions; moreover, both parties learn and benefit from one another. However, on the other hand, the protection model illustrates the type of parent who focuses solely on providing the basic, necessary resources for their school-going child. This approach is detrimental to attaining effective education (Axis, 2020). This, furthermore, highlights a lack of recognition and acknowledgement that parents play a key role as essential stakeholders in their child's education.

Despite the generally limited level of participation, Axis (2020) highlights the benefit of parental involvement in schools, indicating that over a few decades, parental involvement has been found to be vital to and to reinforce effective education. Moreover, parental figures, as stakeholders in the education sector, are crucial and advantageous elements for their offspring, the recipients of the schooling system.

In contrast, Axis (2020) advocates a distinct disparity from the latter statement, as parents and policymakers call for increased participation. However, a barrier presented is the hesitance of teachers, as they seem unsure of the terms of possible collaboration. Axis (2020) speculates that the current state of parental involvement has many factors, from the reservations of teachers to power struggles between schools and parents, or logistics due to work responsibilities.

2.4 THE NEED FOR DISTRICT OFFICIALS IN SCHOOLS

The inception of districts in North America was a response to the growing population of school-going children and the increased demand to provide education and administration to schools in Northern America (Leithwood, 2013). Conversely, Leithwood (2013) added that districts were also seen as a possible remedy to curb municipal corruption. This is, as

reported by Leithwood (2013), that municipalities operated individually and neglected the education legislature, often not observing the rights of learners and parents, which caused legal issues in North America. In South Africa, this is similarly illustrated by DBE's (2021) Amended Policy on the Organisation, Roles and Responsibilities of Education Districts (2018). This 2018 amended policy reiterates that municipalities are not responsible for education. Therefore, the establishment of education districts aligns with the government's service delivery process, which is scaffolded from national to provincial and then local, with districts being the local sphere of government (DBE, 2021).

The need of district officials pertains mainly to managing the administration of teaching and learning processes in schools. The valuable role these officials play is vital to schools, as they ensure that the standard of disseminating knowledge is on par with provincial and nationally set standards (DBE, 2021). Acting as a link, they are a crucial line of communication between PEDs and school sites, as stated by the DBE (2021).

It is evident that without this essential level in the education sector's structure, there would be a disconnect between the national legislature and the reality of action followed by individual schools. Moreover, there is no coherence or uniformity among schools' learning and teaching processes, curriculum management, assessment standards, and governance protocols, such as disciplinary actions and the implementation of resources provided by the National Department of Basic Education.

2.5 ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF ROLE PLAYERS IN SCHOOLS

As in any institution, organisational structure, or system, the education fraternity has distinct and key role players who largely contribute to its functionality and overall success (Acton, 2021).

The intensity of district office presence in schools is uncommonly distinguished by principals and their SMTs as constructive (Bantwini & Moorosi, 2018). In this literature review, the researcher will take a comprehensive look at the core duties and domains of expertise of district-appointed officials. Likewise, the researcher will examine the application of district officials' skills to solve problems and provide guidance and healthy engagement with their SMTs.

2.5.1 District Officials

In line with a statement made by Shuls and Flores (2020), the literature demonstrates that the school district's purpose is to provide educational governance, financial management, curriculum instruction guidance, teacher development, learner assessment, and stakeholder and community integration services to schools within their jurisdiction. These functions are essential to the effective operation and success of schools.

The roles and responsibilities of district officials, according to the ELRC (Education Labour Relations Council) Collective Agreement 4 of 2017, state that CMs conduct performance reviews of principals as well as monitor and support management systems in schools. This also applies to senior education specialists (SEs), as they have to monitor and support the curriculum and empower teachers in their aim toward high-quality teaching and learning (DBE, 2021).

The pivotal district officials, when it pertains to curriculum matters, are SEs. SEs and deputy chief education specialists (DCEs) facilitate curriculum implementation (DBE, 2021). However, a different cohort of district officials tends to the professional support and management of schools and ensures access to education and retention. These officials are the circuit manager (CM) and institutional development and support officer (IDSO) of district offices (DBE, 2021).

2.5.2 School Management Teams

An initiative that has worthwhile outcomes should have long-lasting effects. Education for sustainable development (ESD) is an intervention from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) that explores the implementation and life-long outcomes of climate change in education (UNESCO, 2024). Morgen, Gericke and Scherp (2019) support this statement by adding that ESD ideally promotes a flexible approach to skills, practices and methodologies and thus supports improvement processes. The implementation of intervention programmes such as ESD, for example, is the responsibility at the school level and is the duty of school managers.

Similarly, more specifically in South Africa, school managers and teachers have been mandated to participate in workshops and then implement a new initiative. As a response to learning losses during the COVID-19 pandemic, to fill gaps in learning and recover the losses of the amended 2021, 2022 and 2023 annual teaching plans (ATPs), the

Department of Basic Education initiated the Learning Recovery Programme [LRP] (DBE, 2024).

The implementation of the mass-based project LRP (DBE, 2024) is the responsibility of the School Management Team to ensure planning regarding timetable adjustments, the availability of resources, and the support of teachers and tracking effective practices and, moreover, to sustain the implemented activities.

Similarly, DBE (2015) identified critical focus areas to guide school management. DBE (2015) presents operations regarding the management of the curriculum, planning, monitoring, and overseeing the process of school improvement. According to the DBE (2021), the most powerful steerer of improved education outcomes is the school principal and their management team. Equally, the prospects of school managers require managers to serve as administrators and leaders while they oversee the day-to-day functioning of the school (Naidoo, 2019).

The Personnel Administrative Measures [PAM] (2016) document further reports that principals are tasked with implementing policies and legislation. These include policies that are often condensed into standard operating procedures (SOPs), which serve as step-by-step, user-friendly guidelines to assist school staff in implementing the measures expected of them as part of the various stakeholders in a school institution. In addition, SMTs play a pivotal role in school policy formation and implementation, as part of each SMT member's job description (Van Wyk & Marumoloa, 2012).

More specifically, the drafted policies allude to the Whole School Evaluation's nine focus areas (DBE, 2021), a few of which include school safety, learner discipline, and teacher development. For the same reason, the South African Schools Act No.84 of 1996 highlights that the regulation instructed by the principal must be enacted by staff as it is legislation. Essentially, the role of SMT is to implement policy and monitor the quality of its implementation.

As such, there are several common expectations that district offices have of SMTs, including being the drivers of curriculum and instruction, providing teacher support and development, community and parental engagement, and conflict resolution and resource management (DBE, 2021). The PAM (2016) equally alludes to SMT members' job descriptions (inclusive of the principal, deputy principal, and departmental heads) as responsibilities that indicate the regular review and appraisal of the professional practice of

teachers, with the intent to improve the teaching and learning experience of learners. Notably, Dlungwane (2021) noted that educational leaders must improve the academic accomplishments of all learners in their institution. Importantly, Public Service Act 103 of 1994 added that training helps officials gain proficiency in accountability, adhere to service standards, and effectively consult with community stakeholders.

Acton (2021) unequivocally stated that principals are school leaders and change agents. The former statement is true; however, importantly, it is juxtaposed by Acton (2021), as she inquires if principals are equipped with the tools they need to ensure the advancement of school performance standard levels. Although attention is focused on the school principal, there are other key role players whose contributions are vital. These role players include the parental body, district and provincial office staff, and entities within the surrounding community, such as businesses and community-based organisations. All these entities are regarded as commodities in the education sphere and serve an essential function in improving the school climate and culture (Acton, 2021).

2.5.2.1 *Teacher Professional Development*

According to Ahmed (2021), teacher empowerment and organisational behaviours indicate a correlation between resources and their management.

The researcher intends to establish the connection between teacher empowerment and professional development, as they are compatible. The positive correlation between these two factors indicates that the development of skills translates into an enabled mindset that equips teachers to perform to their best abilities. Ahmed (2021) supplements the latter statement by adding that empowering teachers is foremost to encourage professional growth and, ultimately, to positively impact the Whole School.

In summary, Ahmed (2021) reported that empowered teachers exhibit practices that extend beyond their traditional roles to the advantage of their learners, their colleagues, and the school culture, resulting in their necessity.

2.5.3 *Districts and SMTs Working Towards School Effectiveness*

Burusic, Babarović and Velić (2016) define school effectiveness as the educational quality needed to accomplish the desired standard. Essentially, the characteristics and factors within a school are the building blocks that, in time, affect the functioning of the school (Burusic et al., 2016). School effectiveness relates to the accountability of the school

climate; it is the foundation that relays responsibility to all role players in the education system.

Interestingly, a growing body of evidence suggests that insights from experienced principals may improve efforts toward school effectiveness. Burusic et al. (2016) noted that seasoned principals recommend that more professional development efforts be aimed at coaching principals to be leaders. Regrettably, principals note learning solely through job and networking experiences (Burusic et al., 2016). The correlation between the call for support and the reality of receiving support is interesting because, as school leaders, principals directly bear the responsibility of change in schools; however, this responsibility is shared with district officials.

Additionally, lacking the necessary development from the district, many principals found that they experienced knowledge gaps in understanding the change and leadership process (Burusic et al., 2016).

Prior studies have noted the importance of the necessity of collaborative work between district officials and school leaders. This study will take a stride further and involve the other previously mentioned stakeholders, namely, the parental body and the surrounding community, as all have a vital role in forging the pathway to effective schooling.

The building blocks of a proven effective schooling system involve numerous stakeholders. Moreover, Acton (2021) denotes the schooling environment as an interactive system in which members have an interest in its success.

2.5.3.1 *Effective School Leadership Practices*

An effective school is an educational establishment that consistently delivers high academic achievement rates and an overall positive experience regardless of socio-economic standing (DeMatthews, Billingsley, McLeskey & Sharma, 2020).

A recent research review carried out in the United States of America revealed that the leadership of an effective school has a proven record of managerial processes that support inclusive education practices (DeMatthews et al., 2020). Additionally, among the numerous attributes displayed by effective school leadership is the insightful implementation of contextually curated policies in collaboration with districts, as noted by DeMatthew et al. (2020). In summary, schools that have been identified as effective have strong school

managers but also have a substantial amount of hands-on support from numerous district officials.

2.5.4 Benefits of Role Fulfilment

The ideal standard of performance of district officials and SMTs is characterised by several factors that contribute to effective school leadership and quality teaching and learning outcomes. Ultimately, DBE (2021) clarified that the primary role of district-appointed officials is to assist school managers in the hefty task of good school governance and curriculum matters. In doing so, both SMTs and district officials can produce good work, resulting in high standards and high-quality academic performance in schools (DBE, 2021).

2.6 SMT PERCEPTION OF AND RELATIONS WITH DISTRICT OFFICIALS

A review of the perspectives of school managers in the literature is presented in this section. An aspect that has been labelled as under-researched is the managerial competency of principals (May Abdurrahman, Hariri, Sowiyah & Rahman, 2020). The performance of learners in a school is influenced by the ability of the school principal to enhance their learning experience.

As May et al. (2020) noted, quality teacher performance is driven by the head of the school and depends on the aptitude of the teacher to manage the school toward high-quality teaching and learning. This section will examine the relationships of SMTs with district offices and explore the perceptions of SMTs of district officials.

2.6.1 Whole School Improvement

The notion of Whole School Improvement explores the significance of school development in its entirety (Morgen et al., 2019). DBE (2015) developed a strategic plan that encourages innovation within the education sector. The literature has investigated various applications of numerous school improvement models; however, in this section, the focus on school organisation and improvement will apply the Whole School approach (WSA) (Morgen et al., 2019). WSA is an invaluable approach for empowering learners to participate in holistic education, with attention given to making sustainable choices that affect the society to which the learners belong (Torsdottir, Olsson, Sinnes & Wals, 2024).

2.6.2 Negative Perceptions of District Officials

The findings of one study revealed that effective principals identified several gaps within the dynamics between schools and officials (DeMatthews, Serafini & Watson, 2021). Among the challenges identified by principals are fostering conducive school environments while facilitating district directives (DeMatthews et al., 2021). Similarly, principals report that the disparities include resource deficiencies, parents with unmet needs, and resistant teachers, all of which are district obligations (DeMatthews et al., 2021).

The unfortunate circumstance wherein school management teams often find themselves has overall shown ill-equipped leadership towards schooling.

2.7 ALLOCATION OF DISTRICT OFFICIALS TO SCHOOLS

A functional school structure needs support from designated district officials to advise, guide, and monitor progress in educational practices (DuPlessis & Heystek, 2020). The management of administrative duties, daily operational procedures, and managerial tasks, therefore, needs to be facilitated by district officials to equip and empower school managers for the effective functioning of a school (DuPlessis & Heystek, 2020).

For this reason, DuPlessis and Heystek (2020) investigate the functions within a school that necessitate the presence of district offices and officials and the distribution thereof. The job description of district-appointed officials is to capacitate and strengthen SMTs (DBE, 2013). The office-based educators under focus in this study include SESs, the IDSO, and the CM. Bantwini and Moorosi (2018) argue that CMs, otherwise known as field officers, in particular, were allocated a large number of schools, increasing the difficulty of effectively servicing each school and its specific needs.

Given this information, it is evident that the allocation of schools may be disproportionate in some provinces in South Africa. This highlights a cause for concern, as understaffing ultimately affects service delivery and the quality thereof (Bantwini & Moorosi, 2018).

However, the DBE (2013) policy states that a district generally serves between 75 and 300 schools. The amount is determined by the number of schools, teachers, and learner populations in an area. Other staffing factors include infrastructure, financial and physical resources, and geographical implications, which may alter the allocation of district-appointed staff. In contrast, Bantwini and Moorosi (2018) reported that too many schools were allocated to a single district office.

2.8 THE STANDARD OF DISTRICT SUPPORT IN SCHOOL SITES

The prevalent theme in the recent literature generally highlights the lack of delivery or accountability of basic services to schools. Similarly, Shuls and Flores (2020) noted that district involvement in schools has much to do, meaning that school managers lack the necessary guidance from district offices (Bantwini & Moorosi, 2018).

2.8.1 District Service Delivery

Principals tend to evaluate district leadership based on the clarity of communication of common goals and the alignment of strategies for a school's needs (Shuls & Flores, 2020).

The effectiveness of school districts' performance as perceived by the heads of schools, namely, the principals, specifically investigates aspects of leadership, support, resources, and collaboration. This is because the associated factors present themselves as features that affect the overall effectiveness of a school as an institution of learning. The perceptions of school managers of district support include the professional development of all staff. This point is pivotal in the well-being of a school, but more specifically, in the quality of the dissemination of the curriculum.

Further analysis revealed that Shuls and Flores (2020) indicate that the fundamentals of school support lie in creating opportunities for professional growth and access to expertise for the in-service upskilling of teachers. In addition, across South Africa, school districts are expected to attend to the diverse needs of schools and their learners. Dlungwane (2021) added that this entails the equitable allocation of time and resources to benefit the educational experience of learners.

The notion of the collaboration of school managers and district officials is integral for the inception and implementation of policies. The participation of school managers at the school-level makes the implementation, but more so, the conscription of regulations and guidelines for achieving the school's mission, forward towards realisation (Shuls & Flores, 2020).

Weiss, Templeton, Thompson and Tremont (2018) noted that effective school districts have evidence of working collaboratively with their school managers for the best interests of all stakeholders. Weiss et al. (2018) further postulated that district officials in the Texan region of the United States of America are otherwise labelled 'servant leaders', as they are charged with managing the matter of day-to-day personnel and resources. All in all, Weiss

et al. (2018) reiterate that district officials and school governing bodies should form a unit that functions healthily for the betterment of their learners.

2.8.2 Improved School Culture

The WSA considers the school culture. A school's culture outlines the practices, habits, and beliefs and values that mould and heavily influence the organisation's dynamics, functioning, and overall well-being (Cordeiro, 2021).

In 2021, Cordeiro juxtaposed school culture with the school climate by pointing out that the latter alludes to the tone of a school, whereas the culture of a school refers to the elements that shape behaviours and ideals and is moulded by policies and daily practices (Cordeiro, 2021). Previous studies, such as Cordeiro (2021), have emphasised that school managers play a key role in the implementation of a positive school culture. The researcher supplements the previous statement by adding that district offices play a role in supporting school managers in fostering positive, sustainable norms and values.

Cordeiro (2021) demonstrated that a positive school climate benefits all stakeholders within the school community, which is a feature of a motivating environment lending to the harmonious functioning of an institution. For example, a school with a positive culture has high morale and is conducive to learner well-being (Cordeiro, 2021). In other words, the hidden curriculum of a school is a major determining factor in the success of a school and its stakeholders.

2.9 DISTRICT EXPECTATIONS AND IMPACT ON SMTS AND SCHOOLS

A factor indicating progress along the path to improved relations between school managers and district representatives is highlighted by DeMatthews et al. (2021), who noted that efforts to work collaboratively to confront obstacles are key to growth.

2.9.1 Route to Positive Working Dynamics

Among the key factors in positive change in dynamics, as suggested by DeMatthews et al. (2021), is aligning practices with recent and relevant research. In parallel with the above factors, the study results show that research-based implementations in schools have proven that principals can be effective transformation agents, especially with the reinforcement of school district offices.

A large and growing body of literature reflects the reality in which SMTs find themselves (Bantwini & Diko, 2011). The reality illustrates the shortage of resources and skills at the school level and shows that school managers often 'tread water' to keep schools compliant with administrative deadlines. However, May et al. (2020) reported a correlation between the standard of learner performance and the level of managerial and pedagogical competencies. This study revealed that poor learner performance was related to the lack of proficiency of the head teacher in effectively guiding teachers. Ultimately, the causes have been widely investigated, and many studies have found that district officials are not empowering their SMTs adequately, which has dire consequences, as the quality of instruction is the prime alert of a district office's impact or lack thereof in schools.

This phenomenon is not exclusive to the South African context alone, as in Indonesia, May et al. (2020) reported that the low quality of human resources results in poor-quality education. The appointment of political recruits in managerial and supervisory roles, as opposed to appointment by qualifications and experience, is also a factor that results in low-quality education.

It is the task and responsibility of district officials to ensure that the managerial competency of the principals under their jurisdiction is at a desirable standard. May et al. (2020) emphasise that factors contributing to the improvement of the performance of teachers are the responsibility of the principal; thus, liability falls onto district officials as supervisors of principals, as they are responsible for the academic performance of schools.

Van Der Voort and Wood (2016) contend that institutions where decision-making is school-based are decentralised and self-managed. This raises the question of the district office's participation in school operations. In contrast, the literature illustrates that principals consult with relevant stakeholders to gather ideas that will guide them toward whole-school improvement. Furthermore, studies show that sustained contributions by all involved steer schools toward enhanced academic achievements (Van Der Voort & Wood, 2016). This finding shows that school managers can function autonomously in district offices; however, the best outcomes school-wide result from a reciprocally dependent dynamic between schools and their district offices.

Contrary to the latter statement, Van Der Voort and Wood (2016) record evident power struggles between a circuit manager and a chief curriculum adviser. The strained state of affairs resulted in SMT having to continue operations without guidance and support. This is

but a single instance of many recorded in the literature. Bantwini and Moorosi (2018) add that principals cannot rely on their CMs. This finding indicates that the SMT perceptions of district officials exhibit a lack of confidence and leadership.

Consequently, SMTs have stated that they require capacity-building to manage schools and implement whole-school improvement programmes, and teachers have noted that they need support in teaching methodologies, time management and learner discipline (Van Der Voort & Wood, 2016). Teachers, as stakeholders in education, are often represented by SMTs concerning interactions with district offices, and SMTs largely benefit from a mentor-mentee relationship with district officials. A collaborative or mentorship relationship would likely curb mistrust and miscommunications.

Weiss et al. (2018) noted that the relationship between school managers and their district office ideally reflects a professional and collegial nature wherein skill expansion is a focus. Thus, the essence of ongoing development is fostered.

2.9.2 School-Based Educators

SMT members are tasked with the objective of maintaining the school culture. School culture is positive in that it benefits all stakeholders of the institution (Cordeiro, 2021). Van Wyk and Marumoloa (2012) note that school policies are drafted and disseminated to staff by the SMT. Communication, as an important aspect of the process, improves understanding and enhances policy implementation (Van Wyk & Marumoloa, 2012).

As the literature reveals, it is the SMT that chiefly carries the responsibility to drive cultural positivity within the school to post-level one (PL-1) teachers to willingly adopt and practice in the organisation. PL-1 teachers play an important role in the implementation of programmes. It is integral, however, to first consider their empowerment, which enables teachers to perform their duties.

Teacher empowerment, as alluded to by Ahmed (2021), lends the idea that an empowered teacher is involved in decision-making and actively participates in professional growth. In this way, the reader can detect that teachers in schools are fundamental to implementing and maintaining good practices. This is highlighted by Cordeiro (2021), who noted that daily practices cultivate the organisation over time and ultimately determine the level of effectiveness of reform in improving overall educational results.

2.9.3 Parental Body

According to the literature available in the field, parental engagement refers to being present in a child's learning, whereas parental involvement refers to general participation in schooling (Goodall & Montgomery, 2023). Goodall and Montgomery (2023) revealed that several studies have linked parental engagement with school success. Parental engagement pertains to active participation in a child's educational career (Goodall & Montgomery, 2023).

In conclusion, Goodall and Montgomery (2023) maintain that parental bodies such as school governing bodies (SGBs) should be an informed and supportive resource to the school and are expected by the DBE (2021) to actively play a role in school responsibilities and practices.

2.9.4 Designated District Team

The role of district officials as office-based educators in whole-school improvement necessitates their involvement in schools to be supportive. The contribution of district officials to quality education and role fulfilment is tantamount to the success of a school (Bantwini & Moorosi, 2018).

Capacity-building directed toward school-based educators has been indicated in recent studies as the key to a highly functional and conducive schooling environment (Bantwini & Diko, 2011). It is the duty of district officials to encourage and participate in professional learning communities (PLCs) as members, not leaders, as involvement within PLCs helps establish pathways for open communication (Cordeiro, 2021).

2.9.5 Ideal Standard of Performance

The importance of investment in school leaders cannot be emphasised enough; in the same vein, the priority to invest in principalship development directly affects the overall academic outcome of an educational institution (Levin, Scott, Yang, Leung & Bradley, 2020). Principals unswervingly influence the school climate. Levin et al. (2020) reported that, effectively, SMTs led by principals motivate staff members to improve professional practices and curriculum dissemination to be enhanced, lead to better quality teaching and learning, and, in due course, improve learner performance. This communicates to the reader that SMTs who are sufficiently supported are empowered to lead and manage their

schools to reach their full potential, affecting staff members, facilities, resources and learners.

Leithwood (2013) shows evidence that school districts can contribute to and affect learners' erudition in terms of the development of nine key conditions. District resolution regarding the nine key characteristics emphasises focusing on ensuring coherent instructional systems in schools, tools used to guide decision-making, improvement processes, and approaches to capacity-building. Leithwood (2013) explains that these nine key conditions assist district officers in North America in focusing on these areas to improve the quality of relationships within district offices and between district offices and schools.

Moreover, this practice encourages strong leadership and allows a district to assess the successes of its efforts and develop opportunities to guide aspiring school leaders.

In simple terms, the ideal district office is functional, has a coherent system, encourages staff to be innovative and supports schools, especially underperforming schools (Leithwood, 2013). Additionally, Weiss et al. (2018) seek to defend the view that the dynamics between district offices and school governing bodies have proven to be invaluable to the standard of learner outcomes and achievements. This is because the more productive the relationship between the two parties is, the greater the likelihood that the school will benefit positively.

Role fulfilment in schools and district offices is attainable and sustainable with the implementation of policy. Levin et al. (2020) claim that central office policies should be responsive to principals' inputs, needs and grievances, as policies have a direct effect on schools. The literature extends this notion by stating that the policies drafted should include strategies to retain successful practices, resources and fiscal flexibility. More importantly, innovative policies that are inclusive, fair and contextually relevant can benefit principalship and district officials' roles. Levin et al. (2020) add that such a mechanism can be useful in supporting SMTs and sustaining good practices, as well as removing barriers to professional development. According to Levin et al. (2020), many states in North America are utilising the opportunity to allocate funding toward professional development under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). It is evident that investment in professional development, especially for school managers, is worthwhile.

Moreover, Weiss et al. (2018) support the previous statement by defining transformational leadership as the key to successful turnover within the education sector. This implies that the leadership style of both school district officials and school managers is pivotal in

affecting positive changes in school management dynamics. This is further supported by Weiss et al. (2018), who built on this preface by advocating that transformational leadership is the best for promoting organisational learning, empowerment and, ultimately, responsibility sharing.

Finally, the benefits of parental and community engagement have been proven to contribute to a positive school climate and learner achievement. Purnomo et al. (2020) noted that involved community members and parents foster constructive relationships and broaden learning opportunities, resources, and facilities for learners, while supporting school managers and bettering scholarships for their recipients, the learners. School districts and principals share the duty of ensuring that good practices are embodied by implementing them. School principals and district officials can collaborate to create an environment that is conducive to quality learning and continuous improvement in terms of learner success (Purnomo et al., 2020).

2.10 POSSIBLE CHALLENGES FACED BY DISTRICT OFFICIALS

The reasoning for the under-delivery of support to school managers will be illustrated to the reader within this subsection. As the literature reveals, in South Africa, there are numerous possible causes for this phenomenon, such as a lack of service delivery from the provincial level to the local municipal level. However, more pivotal to this study, it is evident from the available literature on the topic that schools too suffer from the effects of this phenomenon, as district and provincial offices often inspect school standards instead of the main standards, that is, they support the system by capacitating school managers and leaders.

2.10.1 Access to Resources

Instructional materials are fundamental to the teaching and learning process of a school (Adekanbi & Oladele, 2020). This subsection takes a closer look at the availability and management of teaching and learning resources that schools should be furnished with by district offices to be effective schools. When delving into the issue of the resourcing of South African schools, studies have revealed that the concern is twofold.

The subject of access to resources and the quality of teaching depend on the availability of suitable instructional resources (Adekanbi & Oladele, 2020). In addition, Adekanbi and Oladele (2020) noted that the resourcing of education institutions often lacks the

appropriate and adequate learning and teaching support materials (LTSMs) needed to carry out a quality educational experience.

According to Bantwini and Diko (2011), districts need to supplement resources by dispatching more learning materials to schools in alignment with the school's needs and educational demands.

The discrepancies further increase, as the movement toward centring digital educational resources in schools is a growing concern for schools that are currently under-resourced with basic learning materials. As alluded to by Aidarbekova, Abildina, Odintsova, Mukhametzhanova and Toibazarova (2022), the ever-evolving landscape demands that the digital environment be an infrastructural component in schools. Additionally, teachers are trained in such a way that emphasises that it is not another subject but part of the education terrain (Aidarbekova et al., 2022).

This view is supported by Munje and Jita (2020), as they corroborate this statement in the context of South Africa by drawing on selected South African schools. An increasing number of reports of district offices not being furnished with the necessary resources to carry out their duties have been increasingly recorded in recent literature. More concerning are the details of the reported cases. Bantwini and Diko (2011) highlighted that the lack of availability limits district officials' ability to effectively aid school managers in reaching their holistic development goals.

Munje and Jita (2020) suggest that DBE should consider specific school contexts to ensure the allocation and effective use of ICT resources to address pre-existing challenges.

2.10.2 Time Constraints

The findings show that principals have been reported as not being monitored for their performance as school managers per quality management system (QMS) cycles by their IDSO or their designated CMs due to time limitations, as noted by many officials (Bantwini & Moorosi, 2018). In the same vein, district officials have noted that principals' performances are not evaluated, monitored, or supported by IDSOs and CMs. Bantwini and Moorosi (2018) suggested that this oversight and mismanagement of a core element of a school provides further insight into more possible discrepancies.

2.10.3 Skills Development

The presence of a consistent and suitable support and mediation strategy for all teachers, both school- and office-based, is indispensable. The Gauteng Department of Education (GDE) notes within its five focus areas that teacher development forms one of five pillars set toward reaching academic targets (GDE, 2024). The pillar of teacher development focuses on inculcating teachers, SMT, and district and head office support (GDE, 2024). This strategy, which involves onsite support, mini-workshops, and the use of project-based learning as well as focused and overseeing school visits, guides implementation (GDE, 2024).

The inevitable consequences of the “stay at home” policy in response to the COVID-19 pandemic proved calamitous for learning activities and more so for school management. Further exploration was carried out by Munatsiwi and Puryono (2021) to determine the uniformity of procedures and methods for managing early childhood development. Munastiwi and Puryono (2021) reported that the closure of schools revealed that school managers were unprepared to carry out distance and virtual learning. It was found that only a marginal portion of approximately 10% of learning was attainable or achieved with these methods (Munastiwi & Puryono, 2021). Munastiwi and Puryono (2021) focused on the transition that caught teachers and their managers off guard, and as a result, they could not appropriately support the learners in need of further assistance. These challenges, among others, emerged as a result of the changing demands and additional responsibilities. Munastiwi and Puryono (2021) continued by adding that the prolonged consequences were severe, as schools saw a rise in the number of learners dropping out and poor academic performance. Furthermore, through an extensive literature review, Munatsiwi and Puryono (2021) reported a decrease in the social and emotional skills of reception year (Grade R) learners during the COVID-19 pandemic.

2.10.4 COVID-19-Informed Adjustments

School management practices had to be adjusted during the COVID-19 pandemic, as did the routines and expectations of district offices (Munastiwi & Puryono, 2021). The focus shifted toward staffing and adherence to safety protocols ahead of reinforcing school management. However, according to the experience of the researcher, to accommodate the changes brought on by “the new normal”, district officials could opt to work from home on a rotational schedule, and school visits no longer include class visits and learner book

perusal. Tarkar (2020) draws on an extensive range of sources to assess the impact of the pandemic on the education system. The adjusted SOPs in schools need guidance and support from district offices to be effectively implemented within school practices.

Conversely, drawing attention to schools as a specific and essential facet of the sector, Tarkar (2020) alludes to further disadvantaged low-income households whose school-going children are not exposed to online learning, which means that they significantly lag behind and miss many developmental opportunities. With leadership being an interactive process of building relationships and influence, Varela and Fedynich (2020) consider leadership to be a verb rather than a noun, as it is revealed in doing rather than being. Others have highlighted the importance of school leadership. Leithwood and Day (2008) reported that school leadership is influential, second only to effective classroom teaching. This finding attests that the role played by managers in steering the curriculum is the most important function in a school. However, in contrast, the district office's focus shifted more toward staffing and adherence to safety protocols ahead of reinforcing school management during precarious times.

2.10.5 Causes of Ineffective Schooling

To further illustrate school governance, the Personnel Administrative Measures (2016) document remarks that district officials bear the duty to supervise the policies and administrative work of schools within their given jurisdiction. Similarly, the ELRC (2017) affirms that the officials of a district carry the responsibility of guiding SMTs under their care. Furthermore, district officials are a part of decision-making processes concerning budgets, staffing and curriculum matters in schools (ELRC, 2017).

In support of this, Dlungwane (2021) strengthens this perspective by adding that the expectation of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa is to carry out its duties in an ethical, fair, and moral manner.

Interestingly, policy development also falls within the scope of district officials' responsibilities. DBE (2021) indicates that, as opposed to what is experienced in schools, it is not merely the implementation of policy. Rather, it is developing policies to ensure that they align with provincial and national standards as well as to establish guidelines suited for the South African context (DBE, 2021).

2.10.6 Shortfalls of District Offices

In contrast, policy development has been critiqued by Dlungwane (2021), who contends that educational leaders are opposed and inundated with multiple challenges that inhibit their ability to carry out their duties as per the job description. Specifically, staffing challenges, budgetary constraints, parental concerns, and instructional matters are among the few obstacles faced daily by district office-bearers in their pursuit of school support (Dlungwane, 2021).

DBE (2021) illustrates that community engagement is a pivotal part of the role of district officials in supporting SMTs. As schools are part of a community, this is affirmed by Purnomo et al. (2020) in that their involvement in addressing concerns aids in enhancing the educational experience of the learner.

As further explained by Van Der Voort and Wood (2016), the activity of the education district and circuit team is to work collaboratively with school staff to improve access to education, guidance in management and support in achieving scholarly quality in schools (DBE, 2013).

Similarly, the question of why there is currently a high number of underperforming schools comes to the forefront, as it is the job description and basic expectation of district office-bearers to ensure that this does not occur (Van Der Voort & Wood, 2016).

As reported by Bantwini and Moorosi (2018), perhaps the most alarming fact is that district officials focus mostly on monitoring and evaluating the output of teachers, whereas they should guide SMTs in ways to improve instruction and delivery in classrooms.

In addition to compliance in all other previously highlighted areas, the detailed explanation of DBE (2021) urges officials to ensure that schools are compliant with education law and other national legal regulations. More specifically, the ELRC is an independent bargaining body within the education sector. The ELRC Collective Agreement 4 of 2017 states that part of its purpose is to promote and administer employer–employee relations. In doing so, the ELRC’s bargaining council ensures that all parties cooperate with education law and regulate matters by developing inclusive policies and ensuring fair practices (Education Labour Relations Council, 2017).

The most important facet of the role of district officials is the professional development of school staff, with further emphasis by the DBE (2021) on the importance of ongoing

progress through workshops and in-service training. Furthermore, district officials liaise with higher offices such as the head office of a province to account for schools supervised, gain new information, and seek educational enterprises, as declared by DBE (2021).

Researchers have reported that the lack of active district support is not limited to South Africa (Bantwini & Diko, 2011). Multiple district offices in several countries are unresponsive to the call for help from public schools. Van Der Voort and Wood (2016) indicate the correlation between the lack of support and district officials' understanding of ever-restructuring education and lack of support.

On the other hand, Masiya, Davids and Mangai (2021) reported that there are factors that were found to negatively affect the performance of district officials. These factors range from an unsupportive environment, overregulation, political interference, lack of trust, inability to collaborate, intense bureaucracy, and lack of skill utilisation (Masiya et al., 2021). These issues often affect the quality and quantity of supportive interactions and opportunities for SMTs.

2.11 STRATEGIES USED TO ADDRESS THE CHALLENGES

When challenges present themselves, district officials are tasked with addressing the obstacles and overcoming them, as the day's business must continue and their main aim of ensuring access to education must be realised.

The DBE (2021) notes that collaborative work with principals, analysing and planning, and upholding the Batho Pele 1997 principles are recommended tactics to align officials with their purpose in their workspace, through challenges faced.

To elaborate, the Amended Policy on the Organisation, Roles and Responsibilities of Education Districts (2018) establishes fostering a collaborative relationship with school principals as a measure of adjusted restructuring to make districts more effective. Second, the 2018 amended policy emphasises the hands-on approach of examining the challenge and then arranging a programme of action to counter the obstacles presented. However, another example of a strategy implemented to counteract impediments is to enforce Batho Pele's 1997 values by ensuring that district officials are capacitated and furnished with opportunities for professional development (DBE, 2021).

2.12 PERFORMANCE STANDARD MEASURED AGAINST REALITY IN SCHOOLS

A model of excellence of the reinforcement given to school managers by district officials would showcase that SMTs would be cognisant of the generous guidance given and that the SMTs would be fully equipped, capacitated and resourced by their designated district officials. Moreover, an idealistic view of a collaborative relationship that encourages the fostering of methodologies that lead to effective teaching and learning would be on the incline. Likewise, Leithwood and Day (2008) postulated that leadership is measured by the efficacy of its response when attending to its contextual issues.

As such, collaborative efforts between districts and individual schools are key to high-performance standards. The trends and patterns of past literature exploring district officials' contributions to schools indicate, as McKinsey (2012) contends, that teacher development programmes lacked high-quality content and proved irrelevant to their personal growth plans (PGPs). PGPs refer to an operative document in which teachers, including SMT members, populate by indicating professionally aligned disparities. This document is to be utilised to seek opportunities to gain new skills and improve in the area highlighted as a developmental need.

McKinsey (2012) elaborates that highly effective districts thoroughly develop their school-based educators. This is achieved through incorporating the different criteria of effective schooling into their vision, meaning that all stakeholders involved adhere to a common vision as they pursue their goals. A joint mission facilitates harmony within the collaborative team, as a clear vision is both strategic and fundamentally drives professional development (McKinsey, 2012).

The above findings demonstrate to the reader that the teacher-centred, pull approach to professional development programmes, as stated by McKinsey (2012), is more beneficial to school improvement than a district or provincially mandated, top-down approach. As McKinsey (2012) lays further emphasis on school-based educators' agency on how to address their needs at the school level, findings reveal that district offices that heed the calls of their schools have highly ranked outcomes of development programmes based on the feedback given by school managers (McKinsey, 2012).

The evidence presented in this section suggests that school-based educators should be given the platform to request the areas that need to be developed. Second, as McKinsey

(2012) observed, active participants in developmental programmes should be allowed to provide feedback on the efficacy of the programme in school operations to further develop district developmental programmes.

2.13 GAPS IN LITERATURE

A thoroughly researched topic has been the lack of efficacy or support from district officials. This section aims to highlight the missing information concerning the challenging experiences of district officials and how these challenges affect their ability to support SMTs at their assigned schools. Tigere and Makhubele (2019) establish that an unaddressed enquiry, thus resulting in unresolved problems due to a lack of research on that topic, defines a literature gap.

2.13.1 Geographical Context

The researcher has observed a disparity in research regarding the geographical context and published dates of literature in public access. This study explores district officials' challenges experienced from their perspective, more specifically concerning primary school management and governance in the Johannesburg North district. The previously published and relevant literature, such as Bantwini and Moroosi (2018) nationally and Leithwood (2013) internationally, does not contain the current contextual factors and lived experiences of officials in the Johannesburg North district.

2.13.2 Chronological and Conceptual Disparities

Additionally, a conceptual gap exists, as the theoretical framework applied in this study differs from those used in previous studies. This study contrasts with previously documented studies in that by gathering information about the lived experiences of district officials and SMTs in a post-COVID-19 informed work environment. Munastiwi and Puryono (2021) noted that long-term reform is necessary for preparing for possible disasters that affect the education system. This study aims to answer the research questions and address the practical-knowledge conflict gap.

2.14 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework of a study forms the basis for the research plan while placing the study within the broader scholarly discourse and body of literature (Creswell, 2014). Originating in the 1920s but not formally established until 1954 by Von Bertalanffy, as noted

by Yurtseven and Buchanan (2013), the purpose of the GST is to better understand the relationships and behaviours between elements and solve problems within an organisation or system (Yurtseven & Buchanan, 2013).

This model, derived from lived experiences, helps create the concept of the systems model, leading to the GST framework. This multidisciplinary framework grants an understanding of the notion that there are interconnections among the components of a hierarchical system. Moreover, these components are individual yet whole parts of a system and share links that integrate each component into the greater functioning of the system (Kast & Rosenzweig, 1972). These entities interact with one another to improve the overall system, as confirmed by Yurtseven and Buchanan (2013); for instance, the relationships among teachers, SMTs, district officials, and the national office all work in sync as one structure. This comprehensive analysis of the literature provides insight that helps sharpen the focus on the research question.

2.14.1 General Systems Theory's Link to this Study

The GST can be applied to this study to guide the researcher toward a better understanding of the fundamental principles of commonalities and similar concepts in a field that can be used to analyse the functionalism and dynamics within a system (Yurtseven & Buchanan, 2013).

More particularly, in this specific section, the following concepts of systems theory are considered: hierarchy, feedback mechanism, equifinality, and entropy.

First, systems often portray top-down structures with smaller subsystems. Kast and Rosenzweig (1972) claim that each level contains feedback mechanisms because of its distinct set of interactions, and these can be analysed individually. In the same breath, all parts must adhere to the whole they belong to, as the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Similarly, all schools adhere to the district's management plan, as the districts follow the provincial offices' and, in turn, the nine provinces obey commands from the national office, as McManus (2009) highlights the functioning of educational systems as interconnected components of a whole system.

Kast and Rosenzweig (1972) further explained that a deeper understanding of the relationships within a system and subsystem, for example, schools and their districts, is essential to understanding the overall system's state of being. This indicates that the

dynamics between each level of the education system ultimately dictate the nature of the behaviour of the system (Kast & Rosenzweig, 1972).

Equifinality, as Lyman (2004) demonstrated, is that different conditions may lead to similar outcomes; in other words, there is more than one route to a destination. For example, an SMT that receives ample support and another that does not receive an adequate amount of support may both perform well in terms of learner results. This concept tests the notion of determinism and the dynamic abilities of systems; it further cautions the researcher against ascribing a phenomenon to a single influence. Yurtseven and Buchanan (2013) add that complementary law shows us that each party will have a varied perspective, which, however, reveals the truth about a system. As Lyman (2004) proves, systems develop multiple methods to reach their goals, as the system performs based on combined output, i.e., synergy, as illustrated in Figure 2.2 below. McManus (2009) explains the interchangeable roles of the various levels within the education system.



Figure 2.2: An approach using the systems theory model in the education sector (McManus, 2009). Source: Retrieved from <https://www.slideshare.net/slideshow/instructional-communication-technology/188470132>

Finally, entropy reflects the quantity of chance or haphazardness in the behaviour within an organisation. Lyman (2004) noted that every system displays an element of entropy, and it is therefore expected that inputs be made to establish or increase the order of the overall system. Additionally, systems must be checked to prevent the fall into dysfunction.

In this study, the focus will be on exploring the dynamics and relations of district officials and SMTs. Yurtseven and Buchanan (2013) explain that although GST does not provide detailed methodologies for its use in specific fields, as system complexities vary, simple cause and effect logic cannot always apply; it is widely successful in the application of its principles and laws and self-organisation over time. To provide the structure of this study and guide and maintain the research focus, the GST is identified as the most suitable framework to explicate this study. The selected framework will inform the process of data collection and data analysis thereafter.

2.15 CONCLUSION

This chapter reviews recent literature on the topic of district officials and their support for SMTs. The objective of this chapter was to contextualise the study.

To sum up the key points, the concept of district officials was defined, and the various roles of district officials were outlined. Expectations of various stakeholders and challenges in providing support given to SMTs were also discussed, alongside the performance standards aimed at the officials of the districts. The mentioned key points provided a comprehensive overview of the roles and responsibilities of school district officials. The areas explored were research, trends, challenges, and best practices, as found in the relevant literature.

The chapter also examined the expectations of various stakeholders in the education sector; this was linked to job descriptions and several policies emanating from the DBE. Furthermore, it examines the nature of SMT and district official relations, highlighting gaps in the literature.

Additionally, the importance of district officials' role in the progression of functional management and governance in schools was explored. Finally, the need for consistent investment in district officials and SMTs was discussed. The next chapter will present the method of the study.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 INTRODUCTION

The aim of this study was to explore the roles and responsibilities of district officials in supporting primary school management teams in the Johannesburg North district. In this chapter (Chapter 3), the epistemological foundations of this study are explored by methodically examining the information-rich data shared by the research participants. The selected research design and methodology will be discussed extensively.

According to Creswell (2014), the research design of a study pertains to the strategies the researcher uses when conducting the enquiry. Similarly, the methodology of a study describes the procedural approach applied throughout the study (Creswell, 2014).

In this chapter, the researcher outlines the research methods used in the study, including details about participant selection and sampling. The research design is explained, along with the rationale for its choice. The data collection instrument and procedures are described, as are the interview and document analysis processes. The methods for data analysis are discussed, and the ethical considerations observed during the study are also addressed.

3.2 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN

3.2.1 Research Design

A single case study design involving multiple sites was used in this study. The application of the research design generated the process followed by the researcher in conducting the study and collecting data, as explicated by Creswell (2014).

Importantly, Creswell (2014) noted that the use of a case study focuses on the observation of smaller groups of participants. This was relevant to this study, as a fixed, low population was studied as individuals with distinct experiences of similar events. The case study approach was selected in the design of this study for an in-depth exploration of a phenomenon involving the same subject within the participants' everyday context. The context of the study examined the support provided by the Johannesburg North district to the three School Management Teams (SMTs).

A case study is a research methodology that involves detailed scrutiny of a single subject, such as a specific phenomenon, group of individuals, or an organisation (Heale & Twycross, 2018). Heale and Twycross (2018) note that the purpose of employing a case study is to explore and gain an in-depth perception of the unique factors that influence the subjects in the study. Case studies provide intensive investigations into a specific subject matter. This detailed investigation focuses on the everyday context of the individual or group's lives by exploring, describing, or explaining relationships, situations, or phenomena (Heale & Twycross, 2018). The various forms of case studies include multiple instrumental, descriptive and explanatory case studies. The use of the case study research method allows the researcher to employ multiple data collection methods to build an extensive understanding of the case, such as observations, interviews, and analysis of documents.

Hancock, Algozzine and Lim (2021) add that a beneficial aspect of a case study is that insights may be generalised and applied broadly to other similar contexts. A further advantage of a case study research method is that it supplies rich insights, especially for understudied groups of people, situations, or phenomena. In this way, the complexities explored are expanded on, as real-life representations provide examples of previously implied concepts and theories (Hancock et al., 2021).

However, one limitation of a case study is the in-depth nature of the research method, as it may be time-consuming to collect the amount of data required to gain a deeper understanding (Heale & Twycross, 2018). However, another limitation of case studies is that the potential for researcher bias may influence the data interpretation process (Hancock et al., 2021). Moreover, owing to the specific focus of the case study research method, the findings of a study cannot be generalised to fit other contexts.

For this study, employing a case study served as a valuable tool for unravelling details and themes that ultimately informed and enriched the study's context-dependent content. The methods that were followed involved multiple data sources, such as focus group interviews, individual interviews, document analysis and questionnaires. These methods were selected to gain an encompassing inference of the participants' experience and to establish no grounds for doubt about the data collected (Hancock et al., 2021).

3.2.2 Research Paradigm

This study was underpinned by the interpretivism paradigm. Looking through the lens of the interpretive approach was most suitable when conducting this study. Additionally, in the social sciences, the interpretivism paradigm supports the notion of understanding both cultural and social phenomena, which this study intends to achieve (Ayton & Tsindos, 2023). As reinforced by Creswell (2014), the selected paradigm underlines that reality is a social construct and, as a result, no two individual realities are the same. Thus, according to the interpretivist approach, each person living through the same event will experience it differently (Ayton & Tsindos, 2023).

In other words, by applying the interpretivism paradigm, it became clear that there is no singular, distinct and universal overarching law that applies to all. Furthermore, Creswell (2014) reiterates that this is because humankind has unique, individual experiences in which contexts are created to derive meaning from observations and create a worldview based on the knowledge gained and their lived experiences.

Moreover, a research paradigm is defined by what is to be studied from a perspective; furthermore, it determines how the study should be carried out (Rehman & Alharthi, 2016).

This study aimed to explore the challenges impeding district officials from gainfully supporting school managers in primary school settings in Johannesburg North. As noted by Creswell (2014), the selected paradigm allowed the researcher to engage in truth-seeking. This encompassed information shared from different school contexts and participants in various positions and experiences. Similarly, the selected research paradigm allows the researcher to engage in a fact-seeking exercise using an interpretivist lens to analyse data by applying the chosen cognitive orientation (Ayton & Tsindos, 2023; Creswell, 2014).

The anticipated responses from the participants were based on their various experiences. As understood by Ayton and Tsindos (2023), the interpretivist paradigm alludes to knowledge that is built with the inclusion of the subjective and not only the objective. Thus, through the application of this paradigm, the vast and differing perspectives of the participants were explored. Ayton and Tsindos (2023) support this statement by adding that the paradigm has the principle that there are no universal laws applicable as a blanket approach. Rather, each individual derives their meaning from shared experiences.

This study involves office-based and school-based educators at various levels; for instance, office-based educators include senior education specialists, circuit managers, and the institutional support and development officer (IDSO). At the school level, the principal holds a post-level 4 office, the deputy principal is at post-level 3, and DHs are recognised at post-level 2. These various levels and contexts interact mostly at school sites and, at times, in district offices. These entities interact via their varied communication channels and skills, leadership styles, levels of experience, and decision-making abilities.

The ontology of a study defines the main entities and properties of a context and explores how they interact with one another in that specific context (Creswell, 2014). The ontology in this study refers to the reality of the relationship in which district officials offer guidance and support to primary school managers. Second, the connection between the academic and overall performance of a school and the impact of district officials was established. Furthermore, the challenges faced by teachers, managers, and district officials were identified. Coupled with this, the policies affecting the curriculum and its management were scrutinised.

Next, the epistemology of this study drew a contrast between the nature of the lived reality of participants and the explored justifications of understanding (Ayton & Tsindos, 2023). The interaction between reality and the theory of this study led to the construction of its methodology. In that way, the methodology of this study guided the researcher in determining how the sample would be selected.

3.2.3 Research Approach

This study adopted a qualitative research approach. A qualitative study, as explained by Kumar (2011), is a research strategy that explores a specific phenomenon by engaging participants' various perspectives and encouraging the expansion of causative thoughts and behaviours. Similarly, Muzari, Shava and Shonhiwa (2022) stated that an event or situation is designed to describe the views of people who have experienced a phenomenon. This means that the standpoint of the selected research approach is that causality takes the form of interviews, focus groups, document analysis, and observations in a qualitative study.

The qualitative research approach was selected because it was identified as most suitable for exploring lived experiences and gaining the perspectives of district officials and the SMT

members in the field of education. This approach was especially suitable for this study because it allowed the researcher to collect in-depth data and gain an understanding of the obstacles experienced by office-based and school-based educators within the Johannesburg North district. The type of research followed by this study was qualitative. Qualitative research methodology is used to interpret and explore the meaning of variables ascribed to the population (Kumar, 2011). Furthermore, Kumar (2011) noted that data are gathered in the form of experiences within a particular social context.

Qualitative research is ideal for explicating complex phenomena and gaining in-depth insights from the context of participants' lived experiences (Kumar, 2011). In other words, the qualitative research method allows the researcher to gauge and interpret human perspectives (Kumar, 2011). Additionally, the qualitative research method aids the researcher in creating a detailed, in-depth description that shows the population as less stereotyped but rather more particular to the studied population.

However, another feature of qualitative research is that the sample size is often small, and the selection of data collection procedures is based on establishing certainty in the findings (Muzari et al., 2022). The non-numerical data collection in this study followed a semi-structured construction. This involved the primary data being focus group interviews, individual interviews, questionnaires and document analysis. These data include words and diagrams (Creswell, 2014). Particularly in the field of education, it was especially advantageous to utilise this enquiry strategy, as the everyday context was explored in its natural environment to gain optimal insights (Maphoke, 2017).

3.3 RESEARCH CONTEXT

The research setting was located in three public primary schools within the Johannesburg North district. The schools operate in an urban, residential environment where resources and technology are accessible. The surrounding communities of schools value education; however, they face challenges such as service delivery protests, transport costs, and a lack of resources that affect their functionality.

School A is an ordinary public school with learner enrolment of 1018 learners and 28 teaching staff, accommodating Grades R to 7. School B has learner enrolment of 765 learners and 24 teaching staff, accommodating Grades R to 7. As a full-service school (FSS), this school also serves learners with special educational needs (LSENs). School C

is an ordinary public school with learner enrolment of 1042 learners and 30 members of teaching staff, accommodating Grades R to 7. All three schools have a learner constituency from various cultural backgrounds, with a range of socio-economic backgrounds, from child-headed households to two-parented homes, with either one or both parents being employed. School A is located near an industrial area, whereas schools B and C are in residential areas. The three schools fall within an 8 km radius of one another.

The schools were selected because they presented a unique opportunity to study district officials who face challenges that present obstacles to supporting school managers effectively. The study focused on 11 district officials overseeing curriculum and governance and the school management teams of three public primary schools within the Johannesburg North district.

3.4 POPULATION AND SAMPLING

3.4.1 Population

The population of this study comprised a total of 23 participants. The population of a study refers to a selected group of individuals who are studied to derive data and findings (Kumar, 2011). This targeted group of individuals was chosen based on their likelihood to display the ability to supply relevant subject matter for the researcher to collect.

Table 3.1: The Study Population

Participant cohort	Number of participants
District level	11
School level	12
Total population	23

The entire population of this study was sourced from the Johannesburg North district in Gauteng, South Africa. All participants were employees of the Johannesburg North district in Gauteng Province's education district. The targeted group of subjects in this study consists of Cohort A, formed by the CMs and IDSO as the authorities of district oversight and accountability (DBE, 2013) of Johannesburg North (JN). Two participants composed the total population of the study. Second, Cohort B includes nine participants, who are

senior education specialists (SEs) of various subjects from Grades R to 7, as the heads of curricula and co-curricular programmes in Johannesburg North district schools. Among the SEs, five support the foundation phase, and four support the Inter-Sen Phase.

The final and largest cohort is Cohort C, with 12 participants. Cohort C includes three SMTs. As school-level leaders within Johannesburg North, this assemblage includes the principal, deputy principal, and DHs. Three DHs were sampled from three primary schools: intermediate, senior, and foundation phase schools. The school-level sample does not include any post-level 1 teachers.

The foundation phase is formed by Grades R to 3. The intermediate phase includes Grades 4 to 6, whereas in primary schools, the senior phase includes only Grade 7, which is commonly labelled in the field as the Inter-Sen Phase.

3.4.2 Sampling

The sample size of the study included 23 participants. According to Palinkas, Horwitz, Green, Wisdom, Naihua Duan and Hoagwood (2018), sampling refers to the method of determining participants in a study by identifying a knowledgeable group of individuals who best represent the group at large. Purposive sampling – also known as subjective, selective, or judgemental sampling – was used to select the 23 participants. It refers to a non-probability sampling technique that involves the selection of the most appropriate and relevant subjects (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Additionally, the selected participants met the criteria specific to the study; thus, they were not randomly selected but were identified as the most relevant and suited to address the research questions.

The purpose of purposive sampling in this study was to source the prime participants in exploring the challenges of the Johannesburg North district office in supporting school managers in primary schools.

Table 3.2: Study Sample

Participant cohort	Number of participants
District level- district officials	
Circuit Manager	1
IDSO	1
Senior Education Specialists- FP	5
Senior Education Specialists- Inter-Sen Phase	4
Total	11
School level- school management team members	
Principals (schools A, B, C)	3
Deputy principals (schools A, B, C)	3
Departmental heads- FP (schools A, B, C)	3
Departmental heads- Inter-Sen Phase (schools A, B, C)	3
Total	12
Total Participants	23

Key:

FP = Foundation Phase

Inter-sen = Intermediate and Senior (Phases)

Purposive sampling was most relevant for this study as a qualitative research technique that allowed the researcher to select relevant participants. Palinkas et al. (2018) support this by stating that it is the most relevant approach to obtaining information-rich data; as this study aims to reach data saturation, it is found to be most applicable.

To find data to answer the research question, the purposive sampling method was ideal for gathering specific and in-depth data (Creswell, 2014). Furthermore, Creswell (2014) added that the selection of participants is based on their relevance to contribute to the research questions.

The inclusion criterion was that the participants in this study area at the school level were members of school management teams. The inclusion criterion at the district level was that participants had to hold SES, CMs, and/or IDSO positions. The selected number of SES

participants with respect to the 5:4 foundation phase to Inter-Sen ratio was based on the availability and willingness of the SESs to participate in the study.

3.4.2.1 Sampling procedure

The sampling technique employed was the purposive sampling technique to ensure that the selected sample represented the necessary set of district and school representatives to portray the most accurate data possible.

The recruitment process was executed by means of telephone to request the participation of the district officials. The SMT members were approached in person at their school sites. Informed consent was subsequently obtained from all participants, and their confidentiality was maintained throughout the study. The researcher did not encounter any problems with recruiting the participants. This seamless process ensured that all ethical protocols were observed. The participants' willingness to engage contributed significantly to the study's success.

At the school level, the sample had to be members of the SMT to be included.

At the district level, the sample qualified to be involved in this study if they were in office as SESs, CMs, and institutional development and support officers. This is because the study required specific information pertaining to their roles. Those officials who did not fall into the category of senior education specialists, IDSOs, or CMs were excluded from the study.

At the school level, post-level 1 teachers and general assistants were excluded, as the data sought pertained particularly to the management of schools. Additionally, the SMTs of high schools were also excluded from the study.

In this study, the research questions focused on the support given to SMTs by district officials, the obstacles occurring in the process thereof, and the various possible causes. For this reason, the sample of the study was selected through the application of the characteristics of purposive sampling.

3.4.2.2 Information on the 23 study participants

All 23 participants in this study had at least three years of work experience within schools, educational backgrounds, and held a post-level 2 position or above. The participants are all permanently employed under the Johannesburg North district of the Gauteng Department of Education with at least an undergraduate degree.

All the participants were fluent in English and used English to communicate in the workplace. The school-based participants are all based in schools that employ English as the language of learning and teaching (LoLT). Additionally, district officials also utilise English as the medium in which to communicate. Therefore, the data collection process was conducted in English with all participants. Furthermore, a minority (9) of the participants reside outside of the borders of the Johannesburg North district.

3.4.2.2.1 *Information on the 11 District Officials*

All 11 district official participants in the study previously worked as teachers and SMT members at schools before serving at the district level. The criteria to apply for SES, CMs, and IDSO positions are having served at a school for a minimum of 5 to 8 years. Several of the district officials previously worked in schools in other districts. Table 3.3 below displays the biographical information of the 11 district official participants.

Table 3.3: Biographical Information of the 11 District Officials

District Official Role	Years of Experience in Role	Age (years)	Gender
Cohort A			
Circuit Manager	1 year	56	Female
IDSO	5 years	53	Female
Cohort B			
SEs	Minimum 4 years with a maximum of 11 years	Range from ages 37 to 58	7 Females 2 Males

3.4.2.2.2 *Information on the Three Principals*

Two of the principals from Schools A and C have more than five years of educational experience, whereas the principal of School B has been in service for just over one year. All three principals have served only in primary schools, with Principal B having experience as a deputy principal in a special school. The principals of schools A and C have experience only in public ordinary schools.

Table 3.4: Biographical Information of the Three School Principals

Principal	Age (years)	Gender	Years of experience in the role
School A	56	Male	8
School B	53	Female	1
School C	59	Female	9

3.4.2.2.3 Information on the Three Deputy Principals

Three deputy principals participated in this study. Two of the three deputy principals of schools B and C had previous work experience in primary schools as departmental heads. Deputy principal A had experience in high school as a departmental head.

All three deputy principals hold postgraduate diplomas and/or degrees. School C's deputy principal holds a diploma in Educational Management and Leadership, and the deputy principals of schools A and B have honours degrees in inclusive education. At the time of their appointment to the deputy role, all three participants served as departmental heads at their respective schools.

Table 3.5: Biographical Information of the Three Deputy Principals

Deputy Principal	Age (years)	Gender	Years of experience in the role
School A	46	Male	5 years
School B	43	Female	3 years
School C	52	Female	10 years

3.4.2.2.4 Information on the Six Departmental Heads

The criterion to be appointed as a departmental head is a minimum of three years of educational experience (DBE, 2016). Of the six departmental heads who participated in the study, School B's foundation phase departmental head was below the age of 35. Two

departmental heads from School A were younger than 40 years old. School C's two departmental heads and School B's Inter-Sen departmental head were over the age of 40.

Concerning undergraduate qualifications, five of the DHs hold a bachelor's degree in education, and the School C Inter-Sen DH holds a postgraduate certificate in education [PGCE].

Regarding further studies of the DHs, two of the departmental heads—the School C Foundation Phase and School A Inter-Sen departmental heads—hold a diploma in School Management and Leadership. The School B Foundation Phase departmental head holds an honours degree in Management and Leadership.

With reference to the background of previous work experience, four of the departmental heads were appointed from other schools outside their current institutions, and two of the departmental heads were from other provinces, not Gauteng Province.

Table 3.6: Biographical Information of the Six Departmental Heads

School	Phase	Age (years)	Gender	Years of Experience in Role
A	FP	37	Female	5
	Inter-Sen	39	Male	3
B	FP	31	Female	2
	Inter-Sen	45	Male	7
C	FP	42	Female	4
	Inter-Sen	46	Female	6

Key:

FP = Foundation Phase

Inter-sen = Intermediate and Senior (Phases)

3.5 DATA COLLECTION TECHNIQUES AND INSTRUMENTATION

The focal point in the methodology of this study is to utilise research instruments that enable the findings of this study to be accurately and meaningfully analysed for further meaning. Creswell (2014) supports this statement by adding that the selection of data

collection must align with the research strategy and procedures. Furthermore, Creswell (2014) described data-gathering activity, involving numerous participants as sources, to gather knowledge to evaluate and analyse collected data.

The data collection methods used for data gathering included interviews and questionnaires. Table 3.7 below presents the data collection methods used in this study, along with the corresponding sample groups.

Table 3.7: Data Collection Methods and Corresponding Sample Groups

Research method	Corresponding sample group	Number of participants
Individual interviews	Circuit Manager	1
	Institutional Development and Support Officer	1
Focus group interviews	School Management Team members	12
Questionnaires	Senior Education Specialists	9
TOTAL		23

3.5.1 Interviews

Face-to-face semi-structured interviews (individual and focus groups) were used for data gathering in this study. Individual interviews were the first method of data gathering and were conducted with two district officials, namely, the CMs and the IDSO. The researcher sought to determine the challenges faced by officials in supporting school managers. Focus group interviews were the second interview method employed and were conducted with the SMT group at each of the three sample schools. The researcher sought to identify the obstacles encountered at the school level and services that were underdelivered, as well as possible improvements to be addressed by the district office. The interview method, in this study, relates to the statement alluded to by Creswell (2014), as he stated that interviews are often semi-structured. Second, interviews feature open-ended questions and typically encourage participants to express their perspectives. Kumar (2011) noted that interviews are a form of collecting data from knowledgeable sources.

The purpose of selecting interviews to obtain data was due to the benefit of participants being in an environment that was comfortable and familiar to them. Creswell (2014) confirmed that interviews are useful for collecting data in qualitative research. The interviews were guided by a semi-structured interview schedule. The benefit of the semi-structured format of the interviews allowed participants to expand on their experiences and opinions, making the data very insightful and in-depth.

3.5.1.1 Individual Interviews

The semi-structured individual face-to-face interviews, which were the first method of data collection, were conducted with the CMs and the IDSO. These participants formed Cohort A. The purpose of selecting individual interviews with these particular officials was to gain a direct understanding of their view of the support they offer to school managers and to explore their challenges and strategies in delivering the necessary support. The information sought from the two office-bearers was related to the governance of schools and, more specifically, support of the principalship of schools.

The participants were informed that the recording process of the data collection would be twofold; written notes were taken, and audio recordings were documented. The face-to-face interviews were semi-structured and open-ended questions were posed to the participants. The interview schedule was instrumental in guiding the interviews.

3.5.1.1.1 Individual Interview Procedure

The semi-structured individual face-to-face interviews were conducted with the CMs and IDSO; these participants formed Cohort A of the study. The main aim of conducting semi-structured face-to-face interviews was for the researcher to determine the obstacles the CMs and IDSO faced in supporting the governance and principalship of schools.

The office-bearers were contacted telephonically about setting a time and place suitable for them to conduct individual interviews. The interviews were conducted on separate days according to the availability of each participant. The researcher travelled to the site of one participant (CMs), and the other participant (IDSO) met the researcher at their workplace, as it was more convenient for them. The process of selecting venues to conduct the interviews displayed neutrality and ensured the confidentiality and safety of the participants, as recommended by Taherdoost (2021). The ethical clearance certification and informed consent forms were presented and explained to the participants before the interviews. The

researcher ensured that the participants understood both documents and that they understood their rights and role in the study.

The semi-structured interview sessions lasted no longer than 45 minutes each, which is in reference to both the focus group and individual interviews. The two individual interviews and three focus group sessions were each recorded and transcribed individually.

The benefit of this data collection method is that it was confidential for the two office-bearers, as it was on an individual basis. This was because they work separately from SESs, as their role is primarily to provide support to principals and deputy principals. Additionally, the semi-structured format allowed the participants to elaborate on and justify their responses, as corroborated by Taherdoost (2021).

A challenge faced by the researcher was attaining appointments with the two participants, as they had busy schedules and were in demand by various schools and district responsibilities. This was overcome by rescheduling according to their availability and the researcher travelling to a venue most convenient to the participants. The duration of each interview lasted no longer than 45 minutes and was semi-structured, allowing for any additional relevant information to be discussed and elaborated on by the participants.

3.5.1.2 Focus Group Interviews

The focus group interviews, which were the second method of data collection, were conducted with the school management teams (SMTs) at each sample school (A, B, and C). These participants formed Cohort C. The main aim of the researcher was to determine how SMTs felt that they could be better supported by their designated district officials.

The focus group interviews were conducted at the participants' respective school sites. The principal, the deputy principal, and two departmental heads from two separate phases – the foundation phase and intermediate/senior phase (Inter-Sen) – formed the SMT groups at each school and were participants.

With each session lasting no longer than 90 minutes, opinions and views were openly and willingly shared by the members who participated. The time and venue selection, as Taherdoost (2021) suggested, was determined in a manner that was conducive to the SMTs being comfortable and knowledgeable that the information they shared with the researcher would remain anonymous. The SMTs selected their own offices, staff rooms, and/or boardrooms, as well as the date and time that best suited them to conduct the focus

group interviews. The semi-structured focus group questions allowed each participant to expand on topics and points they felt needed more expression, as Kumar (2011) encouraged. The participants were able to expand on their answers to the questions and provide explanations to support their responses.

3.5.1.2.1 Focus group interview procedure

Each school principal was contacted in person with a suitable date and time to conduct the focus group interviews. Informed consent forms were distributed, and the researcher's ethical clearance certificate was produced. The researcher ensured that participants understood their right to withdraw at any stage, without penalty, and that the information they shared would remain anonymous. On the day of each focus group interview, the SMT students chose the venue of their choice in the school where they felt most comfortable.

The benefit of this data collection method in this study was that it was most convenient for the SMTs at their school sites. An additional benefit, as reinforced by Taherdoost (2021), was that the focus group method allowed the participants to elaborate and provide further insight to the researcher, as the focus group interview method followed the semi-structured format.

The open-ended questions and responses were audio-recorded, and written notes of the responses were additionally transcribed. As a semi-structured interview, some responses encouraged other participants to elaborate on points made by others, which resulted in the addition of other relevant issues being discussed. Each focus group interview session with the SMTs of Schools A, B and C lasted no longer than 90 minutes.

3.5.2 Questionnaires

The questionnaires, which constitute the third method of data collection, were administered to the 9 SESs in the Johannesburg North district. These participants formed Cohort B. This section of the data collection process was conducted over the phone because many SESs were unavailable in person, as their job description demands that they visit many school sites across the district. Notably, many school visits are unpredictable with respect to the duration of support and monitoring visits. However, on average, the duration of the phone calls was no longer than 30 minutes.

The participants were informed that the recording would follow a dual process through the researcher taking written notes and audio recording their responses.

3.5.2.1 Questionnaire Procedure

The questionnaire procedure began with a telephone contact with each SES to agree on the most suitable time to conduct the data collection process. In those same interactions with SES officials, the researcher sought additional contact details to share the informed consent form and ethical clearance certificate before conducting the questionnaire. Upon the agreed date and time with each official, the questionnaire was conducted with the individual SESs; these questionnaires were audio-recorded with additional written notes of the responses. The researcher ensured that she was speaking to the correct person by confirming the personal details of the participant first before proceeding with the interviews. The researcher sought to determine the challenges that SESs faced in supporting primary school SMTs and the strategies used to overcome those challenges.

The purpose of selecting a questionnaire as a method of data collection was to gain an understanding from each of the different subject specialists in the three phases. Additionally, to explore the obstacles they face and the strategies they apply to overcome the challenges presented in supporting their SMTs. The duration of the semi-structured questionnaire was longer than 30 minutes per telephone session.

The researcher found that the benefit of this data collection method is that it was most convenient for SESs, as they visited many sites during their work hours and were not physically available. Taherdoost (2021) supports prior statements, as he indicated that an advantage of using questionnaires to collect data is that they are flexible data collection methods and can be conducted face-to-face, online, or over the phone.

A challenge faced by the researcher was being prompt in the transcription process, as it took place after all the individual questionnaires were conducted, and coding of the responses was conducted following a categorising system. This was done promptly after the questionnaire procedure with all SESs was concluded, ensuring that the information was recent and most understandable to the researcher.

3.5.3 Document Analysis

Document analysis was the fourth method of data collection for this study. This research method was useful in this study because of the individual job descriptions of school managers at various levels and district officials in their various allocations. The work

relations and dynamics between the school managers and district officials were further examined by analysing policies.

Table 3.8 below presents a list of the documents that were analysed. White Papers, Green Papers, Research, Monitoring and Evaluation Reports, and Manuals formed part of the document analysis to shed more light on the prospects and needs of schools in South Africa. In particular, the workshop resources shared by the Gauteng Department of Education (GDE) as the provincial office and the Johannesburg North district office, such as handbooks and presentations, were used. As the study was conducted in the Johannesburg North district, these documents were a source of relevant information.

Table 3.8: Documents Analysed

Document	Purpose
1. Personnel Administrative Measures (DBE, 2016)	To check the job descriptions and expectations of school managers and district officials.
2. Education White Paper 6 (DBE, 2001)	To check inclusive practices - how school managers implement and monitor in-class practices.
3. Green paper (DBE, 1999)	To find out changes in special education, the required changes needed in the schooling system, and the training of school teachers and managers.
4. National Assessment Policy Act (DBE, 1996)	To find out the district offices' roles and responsibilities in supporting school managers.
5. Reporting tools	To check district feedback to SMTs after school visits - monitoring and evaluating areas to improve, and good practices observed to be shared with other schools and/ districts.
6. Workshop handouts	To find out the content and guidelines informing school managers and teachers of the processes of updated operating procedures and policies in schools.
7. Memoranda and circulars	To check the latest updates regarding policies and notices to action new protocols in schools.

3.5.3.1 Document Analysis Procedure

The sourcing of the documents to be analysed was launched from a thorough search through the DBE website. This platform, which is furnished with textual files to resource the public, was closely scrutinised by the researcher. Thereafter, note-taking, coding of

information, and categorising the data ensued. The categorisation of data allowed the researcher to begin the process of deriving meaning from the information (Creswell, 2014).

The scrutiny of the documents sourced for document analysis occurred on the private property where the researcher was based. This is due to the retrieval of hard copy documents during the process of data collection at various sites; therefore, these documents could not be analysed onsite. On the other hand, soft copies of the documents were sourced online from the Department of Basic Education website and analysed thereafter. These documents include memoranda, which affect school visits and/or trainings and workshops, relevant circulars, and teacher- and learner-aimed policy documents. In particular, the analysis focuses on job descriptions of departmental heads, deputy principals, principals, senior educational specialists, institutional development and support officers, and the CMs, which were extracted from the Personnel Administrative Measures (DBE, 2016).

The procedure of document analysis was guided by the researcher seeking the duties, roles and responsibilities expected from each office within school management teams and district official posts. Furthermore, the documents sought were documents that outlined the themes alluded to during the interviews and questionnaires with the participants. The documents that highlighted the themes prevalent in the interviews and questionnaires included, first, the National Education Policy Act (NEPA), and second, Education White Paper 6 (2001). Finally, circulars and memoranda were distributed to schools during the year 2024 prior to the 1st of September 2024. The benefit of this data collection method is that it allows a deeper understanding of the responses and topics shared during the interview and questionnaire processes (Taherdoost, 2021).

3.6 DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

According to Creswell (2014), data analysis and interpretation entail summarising and making sense of the collected data by situating it within the sociocultural context of the study. In this process, the researcher reviewed all the audio recordings and written notes to capture the participants' contributions thoroughly during the interviews and questionnaire responses. Braun and Clarke (2012) emphasise the importance of a structured approach to qualitative data analysis. Accordingly, the primary aim of this process was to synthesise the information provided by participants during data collection.

This study employed the thematic data analysis method, which Braun and Clarke (2012) define as the process of identifying and organising patterns or themes within a dataset. As Bingham (2023) indicated, similar themes were grouped, enabling the researcher to systematically categorise patterns. The rationale for this approach was to develop codes that allowed the researcher to facilitate a deeper analysis and interpretation of the data.

Adopting the six steps of thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006; 2012), the researcher familiarised herself with the data, transcribed it, combined the codes into themes, reviewed the themes, named and defined them, and finally reported the findings.

- **Step 1- Familiarisation of Data**

The familiarisation of data began with the researcher orientating herself to the data by listening to the audio recordings and reading the written notes. This step was repeated to ensure that the researcher fully comprehended the collected data.

- **Step 2- Transcription of Data**

The data were transcribed from audio recordings to written notes by organising the data into primary categories, namely, cohorts A, B and C. Cohort C was further segmented into three different focus groups, FG1, FG2, and FG3. The data analysis of the individual interviews was conducted using a colour-coding system. This was completed once the focus group interview responses had been transcribed and analysed. This was done to assist the researcher in categorising the collected data into specific themes based on the research questions (Taherdoost, 2021). The analysis of the focus group discussions was conducted immediately after each focus group session, and the colour-coding system was used. Since the information was new, the researcher found it to be the best practice to analyse the data at this stage of the process. In line with Bingham (2023), the steps taken to analyse the responses to the questionnaire involved reading the questions aloud to the participants. As they responded, their answers were audio-recorded, noted as keywords, and then transcribed. This study also employed document analysis to obtain additional data to support the knowledge gained during the interview and questionnaire processes (Taherdoost, 2021).

- **Step 3- Combining Codes into Themes**

Codes were established by the researcher through sorting and coding the data into themes and classifying similar ideas together (Bingham, 2023). The accuracy of the grouping was further ensured by repeatedly reviewing the audio recordings and written transcripts to verify the common key patterns. The codes emerged following a manual colour-coding process, where similar ideas, themes and patterns were grouped using specific codes and colours. Each colour code was assigned to correspond with the four main research questions. Additionally, this study gathered data through document analysis, which led to the emergence of an additional code. This prompted the introduction of a new colour, orange, into the colour-coding process. Once the secondary data sources were in the possession of the researcher, analysis was conducted (Taherdoost, 2021).

- **Step 4- Defining and Naming Themes**

The researcher deduced the meaning of the participants' responses by seeking similar sentences, phrases, or words and categorising them into themes. The emergent themes were labelled according to the research question to which they were relevant. The researcher coded and categorised the data as follows:

Blue: Responses coded in blue were related to research Question 1.

Yellow: Responses coded in yellow were aligned with research Question 2.

Red: Responses coded in red were related to research Question 3.

Green: Responses coded in green were related to research Question 4.

These codes were further categorised into similar themes and patterns. The steps taken to analyse the data from the focus group and individual interviews, questionnaires, and document analysis were guided by the research questions (RQs). The questions were as follows:

- RQ 1: What are the roles and responsibilities of various district officials toward primary school management teams in Johannesburg North District?
- RQ 2: How do district officials support primary schools in Johannesburg North district?

- RQ 3: What are the challenges district officials encounter in supporting primary school management teams in Johannesburg North District?
- RQ 4: What strategies do district officials use to address the challenges they encounter?

- **Step 5- Reviewing the Themes**

The review of the identified themes assisted the researcher in determining the accuracy of the analysis through the repetition of keywords, ideas, and themes in the audio and written recordings (Bingham, 2023).

- **Step 6- Reporting the Findings**

According to Braun and Clarke (2022), the report of findings refers to the details of the information gathered and the interpretations presented in the study. This meant that the researcher identified, organised and categorised patterns to form codes and themes to assist in the analysis of the data.

The thematic analysis method was most suitable for this study, as it is used to address a range of research questions. This is supported by Braun and Clarke (2022). This benefited the study as organising data by coding, as Bingham (2023) suggested, aids in planning, expressing, and systematically formatting data analysis. Muzari et al. (2022) added that thematic analysis aids in supporting the credibility of a study by using the voice-in-the-text transcription process. Moreover, the use of thematic analysis ensures the reduction of ambiguity within the dataset and further strengthens the reliability and validity of a study (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

The table below shows an example of the process followed from participant responses deduced by coding and categorising the emergent themes. Table 3.9 below illustrates how the researcher organised and categorised the data to identify emergent themes.

Table 3.9: Emergent themes from the data

Questionnaire question	Transcript	Code	Category	Emergent theme
<p>In which ways do you think the working conditions of district officials could be improved?</p>	<p><i>“The late release and updating. Like, condonation might or might not change. We need to have those conversations with parents. So, when a bill has passed that must to implemented, that communication needs to go to schools. And communication from schools, as we sometimes learn things from social media instead of it being reported. It’s also needed to update devices and refill fuel at own expense, as the sites are far the amount given sometimes doesn’t suffice.”</i></p>	<p>Physical resources.</p> <p>Communication channels.</p> <p>Time constraints.</p>	<p>Resources.</p>	<p>District officials’ challenges.</p>
<p>How would you describe your relations with your SMTs?</p>	<p><i>“We work well together because they are the ones who engage in the teaching and learning and run the school. They need to have strategic planning, manage resources, and be compliant. It’s a very important</i></p>	<p>Line and staff function.</p> <p>District-SMT relations.</p>	<p>SMT functionality.</p> <p>District oversight.</p>	<p>District officials’ roles and responsibilities.</p>

	<i>relationship. So it's about how I help empower, manage relationships with stakeholders and how we inspire the school leaders to serve the community in the best way."</i>			
What would you say is the general sentiment of officials regarding support from the provincial office?	<i>Provincial stats are because of what happens in the classroom, so SMTs are the bridge, so it's a very important relationship to maintain. So we have strong FPs, but we know Grade 4s' comprehension level needs to be improved; that's where we can work together to set up for success. Policy awareness and circulars, a problem is that a circular will not be released yet, and you need to be working on it with SMTs to be up to date and effective."</i>	Time constraints	Policy implementation	District officials' challenges.

3.7 RELIABILITY AND VALIDITY/CREDIBILITY AND TRUSTWORTHINESS

In this study, research reliability is related to the repetition of research findings (Kumar, 2011). With particular attention given to this study, the interview processes and questionnaires with SMT members and district officials as data collection display the consistency and stability of information gathered when seeking reliability from a study.

3.7.1 Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness of the findings and interpretation of the data lends to the accuracy of the findings (Bos, 2020). The trustworthiness of the study will be expressed in the conformability, credibility, transferability, and dependability of this study. This study's methods and findings are trustworthy in that the data collection process was conducted by accurately transcribing the responses. The interpretation of the participants' responses was revised repeatedly to ensure that no changes were made to alter the meaning of the data.

3.7.2 Conformability

The findings, contexts and contributions of the participants in this study are accurately represented and not distorted by the researcher's perspective or opinions. Conformability was achieved in this study by detailing each step taken in the data collection and analysis processes (Kumar, 2011). The detailed transparency of the study allows the reader to identify any similarities with their own context and derive their own conclusions. The written transcription of the data collection is retained by the researcher, and the process of thematic analysis is detailed and available in written format.

3.7.3 Transferability

The transferability of this study speaks to the extent to which the findings could be applied to other contexts or populations (Creswell, 2014). Because Johannesburg North is an education district within South Africa, the findings may apply to many other education districts within the country. The context of this study may be relevant to other groups of people, as school managers often need additional support with the day-to-day challenges faced within the managerial aspect and in ensuring the delivery of quality education. On the other hand, district officials are often inundated with a plethora of responsibilities both on and off-site.

The settings of the focus groups were within the staff rooms of the schools, which are communal and informal spaces conducive to the broader population; however, a limitation of the transferability of this study is that not all SMTs and district offices face the same challenges regarding a lack of support from upper structures and school managerial shortcomings. However, the findings will provide them with insight into the realities faced by other SMTs and district offices, which they may be able to relate to.

3.7.4 Credibility

Credibility refers to the standard of measurement of the believability of the contents of the study (Creswell, 2014). Additionally, Bos (2020) noted that the credibility of the findings and the interpretation of the data contributed to the accuracy of the findings. This study is credible in that the researcher acknowledges the presence of potential biases as a current SMT member. Additionally, as a qualitative study, the meaning of lived experiences was able to be interpreted (Almeida, Faria & Queirós, 2017). The awareness of potential bias prevented the researcher from influencing the input of participants, as in the data collection and analysis process, the researcher remained objective and transparent.

3.7.5 Dependability

The dependability of a study refers to the consistency and reliability of numerous contexts (Kumar, 2011). The dependability of the data collected was ensured by systematically and thoroughly analysing the data with each data collection technique. The dependability of this study was strengthened by the transparency and consistency of the recorded data. The researcher acknowledged their potential bias as an SMT member but overcame the potential for influencing the study by ensuring objectivity and transparency with the participants and data collection and analysis processes and thus the overall dependability of the study.

3.7.6 Reliability

Research reliability refers to research methods that reproduce the same results repeatedly (Kumar, 2011). Following the recording of the individual and focus group interviews, transcribing repeatedly revealed emergent patterns and themes. This reflected the saturation of the data the researcher hoped to obtain.

The reliability of the data collection was evident in the focus group interviews, with the three SMTs and nine SESs sharing very similar responses about their experiences and perspectives. This indicated to the researcher that the consistent experiences of the participants presented a pattern regarding the phenomenon under study.

3.7.7 Validity

The external validity of the study was tested by collecting data from three different SMTs and district officials allocated to differing phases. Creswell (2014) highlighted that the internal validity of a study focuses on answering the research question.

The internal validity also assesses whether the research design and data collection process are objective and unbiased (Creswell, 2014). In this study, the data gathered were in line with the main research question and sub-questions. The data collection techniques allowed the researcher to voice record and take written notes of the participants' responses, which ensured accuracy and unbiased evidence of the data. Moreover, Andrade, Almeida and Quintao (2020) argue that case studies improve the validity of a study as multiple perspectives are gained on a single phenomenon.

The validity of this study was ensured by the researcher checking the understandability of the questionnaire and interview questions with the participants before they were asked for their responses.

3.7.8 Authenticity

Authenticity was ensured in this study by the researcher practising fairness during the data collection and analysis processes by allowing all participants an opportunity to express their experiences and perspectives (Creswell, 2014). Second, the researcher assisted the participants in better understanding the questions posed to them when they needed clarity. This approach enhanced the insights shared by the participants. Authenticity was further achieved by the researcher, who encouraged participants to share additional information relevant to the topic beyond the questions asked.

3.8 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Researchers carry the moral responsibility to portray the gained information accurately (Bos, 2020). The ethical standing of this study is well grounded, as the researcher abides by the research ethics standards of the institution in which she is enrolled and ensured that no misrepresentation of information takes place. Equally importantly, the safety and protection of participants were ensured through the data collection process and will remain as such.

3.8.1 Permission to Conduct Research

This study was reviewed and approved by the Ethics Review Committee of the University of South Africa on 2024/05/08, with the approval reference number 2024/05/08/60113286/16/AM.

The participants in this study were provided with detailed information about the study's purpose, procedures, and any potential risks and benefits associated with their participation in this study. Informed consent was obtained by means of signed forms, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any point they felt the need to.

3.8.2 Informed Consent

As Creswell (2014) explained, informed consent pertains to the participants' agreement to partake in research, with knowledge of all necessary information, including possible risks involved in the study.

Informed consent includes the participants being informed regarding the research aim and data collection technique they will partake in, especially their willingness and agreement to take part in the research endeavour (Kumar, 2011).

Similarly, Corey (2016) added that informed consent alludes to the participants of the study knowing the risks posed to them as participants. The researcher ensured that the participants were aware of the low risks entailed and their rights to anonymity and to withdraw at any stage of the data collection process if they wished. Informed consent was obtained by means of signed forms, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any point they felt the need to.

3.8.3 Respect for Autonomy

The participants were informed that they were not legally or in any way bound to participate in this study. The disclosure of information without the consent of the participant is regarded as unethical (Creswell, 2014). Individual letters requesting that each member take part in the study were distributed in person to each potential participant. After reading the letter and agreeing to participate in this study, the official participants were thoroughly informed of their rights to anonymity, safety, and voluntary participation. The anonymity of each participant meant that the names of the schools, school managers, and district officials, as

well as any other names divulged during the data collection process, would remain anonymous. This is executed by labelling the school names as schools A, B, and C.

As such, the safety of each participant was ensured by district officials and SMT members, who were assured of confidentiality and privacy. This took the form of participants not being labelled according to their specific titles but rather the senior educational specialist of the foundation phase or the Inter-Sen Phase, for example.

Each participant was informed that, should they request the findings of the study once complete, the findings would be readily available to them. Furthermore, a copy of the dissertation would be available at the university where the study was registered.

To ensure confidentiality, participant data were anonymised by assigning codes to the participants. All records were stored in encrypted files accessible only by the researcher. The data will continue to be retained for five years before being securely destroyed.

3.8.4 Non-maleficence

According to Hasan (2023), non-maleficence refers to the key ethical principle of ensuring that no harm occurs to the participants in the process of the study. The study adhered to compliance with ethical guidelines, as the ethical principles of respect for persons and protection of the participants' rights and well-being were followed. As such, pseudonyms are employed to anonymise and protect the identities of every participant involved in this study. There were no conflicts of interest in the conduct of this study.

3.8.5 Research Merit and Integrity

Research merit and integrity refer to genuine data that are justified with information that is relevant to the study and worthwhile in the concerned field (Pieper & Thomson, 2011). Furthermore, the principles of research merit and integrity indicate that three concepts, i.e., research and design methodology, participatory approaches, and maintaining integrity, are upheld and applied throughout the research process (Pieper & Thomson, 2011).

Pieper and Thomson (2011) added that research merit and integrity ensure that a study is conducted in an appropriate manner that aligns with the management of potential bias, the selection of an appropriate context, and a fair analysis of results. The researcher obtained permission from the GDE through a completed and signed GDE Research Approval form.

Furthermore, the researcher gained verbal approval from the schools to gain access to the sites and conduct focus group interviews.

3.8.6 Protection of Data

Van Der Sloot (2020) defines the protection of data as safe storage, anonymity of the content, and control of access to data. Similarly, the protection of data refers to the inclusion of technological security measures and backing up the data of a study. Additionally, participants have rights in line with the ethical considerations of a study, and a violation of these obligations leads to hefty monetary fines (Van Der Sloot, 2020). To ensure confidentiality, participant data were made anonymous by assigning a code to the participants, and all records were stored in encrypted files accessible only to the researcher. The data will be retained in the researcher's Google OneDrive and DropBox for a five-year period before being securely destroyed.

3.9 CONCLUSION

In summary, this chapter covered the premise of both the research methodology and the design. The interpretivism paradigm was defined as the lens through which the data would be theorised and understood. The various cohorts of the Johannesburg North education district participants were detailed. Furthermore, the multiple tools of research, namely, interview processes, a questionnaire, and document analysis, assisted in depicting the data shared by participants. Moreover, the reliability, validity, credibility, and trustworthiness of the study were supported by the researcher. Finally, the research ethics of this study were described. The next chapter (Chapter 4) presents the research results and discussion.

CHAPTER 4: DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

4.1 INTRODUCTION

Chapter 3 covered the research methodology and design of the study, further detailing the data collection process. Chapter 4 presents the findings of the collected data. Furthermore, this chapter analyses and interprets the collected data to generate insights into the study concerning the problem statement.

This chapter describes the method applied by the researcher to analyse the collected data; moreover, it presents a discourse of the findings emanating from the analysed data. The main aim of this study was to explore the roles and responsibilities of district officials toward primary school management teams (SMTs). The problem statement of this study inferred that there was evidence of a lack of frequency and focus on the support received from district offices across South Africa toward schools within their jurisdictions.

Table 4.1 below provides the research questions and the aim and objectives of this study. This table shows in detail the sub-questions related to the main research question, alongside the aim and objectives of the study, which informed the data analysis and discussion of the findings.

Table 4.1: Research Questions, Aims and Objectives of the Study

Research Question
What are the roles and responsibilities of district officials in supporting primary School Management Teams in Johannesburg North District?
Sub-questions
<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. What are the roles and responsibilities of various district officials toward primary school management teams in Johannesburg North District?2. How do district officials support primary schools in Johannesburg North district?3. What are the challenges district officials encounter in supporting primary school management teams in Johannesburg North District?4. What strategies do district officials use to address the challenges they encounter?

Research Aim
This study aimed to explore the roles and responsibilities of district officials in supporting primary school management teams in Johannesburg North District.
Research Objectives
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ To explore the roles and responsibilities of district officials toward primary school management teams in Johannesburg North District. ▪ To determine how district officials support primary schools in Johannesburg North district. ▪ To understand the challenges district officials encounter in supporting primary school management teams in Johannesburg North District. ▪ To establish the strategies district officials use to address the challenges they encounter.

4.2 PROCESS OF DATA COLLECTION

Qualitative data were utilised to investigate this study's objectives, with the employment of face-to-face individual interviews, focus group interviews, questionnaires and document analysis as research methods.

The data were collected from three schools. During the field research process, the researcher began by conducting focus group interviews with three sets of SMTs, which composed Cohort C. Each focus group consisted of four members: one principal, one deputy principal, one foundation phase departmental head, and one Inter-Sen departmental head (making up a total of 12 SMT members). The focus group interviews with SMTs took place after contact time in the afternoon, once learners had been dismissed, as was the case when Cohort C participants were available. The 3 SMTs hosted the focus group interviews in their respective staff rooms.

This was followed by administering the questionnaires to Cohort B district officials, specifically the nine senior education specialists (SEs) assigned to the three primary schools. Of the nine SEs, five participants were foundation SEs, and four participants were intermediate and senior phase SEs. The questionnaires with Cohort B participants were administered via telephone: three participants responded during office hours, and six responded after office hours. Accordingly, the researcher conducted telephone interviews from her school office and home environment. The questionnaires were conducted via telephone, as SEs expressed their availability and willingness to participate in the study

through brief telephonic interactions. The participants were informed that a secondary device was recording the calls, and written notes were also taken.

The data collection process included two separate, face-to-face individual interviews with Cohort A district officials, the circuit manager (CM) and the institutional development and support officer (IDSO), at their most suitable time and site. The individual interviews were conducted at the school sites where the Cohort A participants were located during work hours, specifically in the principal's offices. Both individual interviews with the circuit manager and the IDSO were conducted in the late morning.

The document analysis process was partially conducted at the school's A and C sites, with the collection of circulars, memos, and school policies. Soft copies of the Personnel Administration Measures (2016) document, Education White Paper 2: Notice 130 of 1999, Education White Paper 6 (2001), and the National Education Policy Act (NEPA) 27 of 1996, Notice 300 of 2013, were accessed online at the researcher's workplace and home.

All data collection processes, individual and focus group interviews, and questionnaires were conducted in English. The document analysis process was conducted using documentation published in English.

4.3 PROCESS OF DATA ANALYSIS

The study employed thematic analysis as the primary data analysis method. Using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework, this approach involved engaging with the data to identify meaningful patterns, which were followed by the systematic creation of codes, which were refined into sub-themes, and then the final naming of the overall themes. The analysis process of this study followed a qualitative design informed by general systems theory (GST) (Von Bertalanffy, 1972). GST aided in perceiving the schools and the district office as interconnected components within a broader education system. Through thematic analysis, responses from the focus group interviews, individual interviews, and questionnaires were examined to identify patterns in school management teams' (SMTs) perceptions of district support and district office challenges. Additionally, the document analysis included DBE policy documents, memoranda, and circulars. These documents provided contextual insight and further supported data triangulation, which enhanced the trustworthiness and credibility of the findings.

All audio-recorded data were meticulously transcribed verbatim by the researcher. The thorough transcription process preserved the participants' exact words to maintain authentic meaning; this approach ensured that ethical standards were upheld. The data were subsequently coded using a colour-coded system aligned with the study's sub-questions; the coding system facilitated detailed thematic interpretation. According to Lester et al. (2020), a qualitative approach enables in-depth understanding by organising complex information into coherent, meaningful categories. Verbatim quotes were employed throughout to support the thematic responses, while the data were also summarised in table format, as advised by Creswell (2014), to present findings systematically.

Table 4.2 below presents the main themes and their corresponding sub-theme(s), which were derived from the data analysis process.

Table 4.2: Themes and Sub-Themes Identified from the Data Analysis Process

No.	Theme	Sub-themes
1.	Roles and responsibilities of district officials	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strategic planning • Curriculum delivery • Staff development
2.	District officials' methodologies to support primary schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School visits and classroom observations • Cluster meetings and consultations
3.	Challenges of district officials in supporting school management teams	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of resources • Lack of communication
4.	Strategies employed by district officials to address challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Planning and support • Oversight and accountability

4.4 INFORMATION ON THE SCHOOLS AND PARTICIPANTS

4.4.1 Information on the Three School Sites

The research setting was located in three public primary schools within the Johannesburg North district. The schools operate in urban and residential environments. Schools and their surrounding communities face challenges such as frequent service delivery protests, school transport costs, water and power outages, lagging public health services, gang-related criminal acts, and a high unemployment rate of community members that affect the community's functionality.

Detailed information regarding each school site provides a broader context in which the study was conducted. All three school sites were secular primary schools; in other words, these schools operate independently of the influence of religious and spiritual beliefs in their curriculum and hidden curriculum. The three schools serve learners admitted to Grade R to Grade 7. All three school sites had the same designated district officials. The quintile grading of the schools is also mentioned below; the quintile of a school refers to the economic rank of the surrounding area. A scale of 1–5 was used, with 1 representing poor access to resources and 5 indicating rich access to resources.

Notably, all three schools fall within the no-fee status, meaning that parents and guardians are exempt from paying school fees based on the economic landscape of the community, as stated in the South African Schools Act 84 of 1996. School A in this study was an ordinary public school. This quintile-3-categorised school had a learner enrolment of 1018 learners and 28 teaching staff at the time of data collection, accommodating boy and girl learners from grades R to 7.

School B was a quintile 4 category, a full-service school. Full-service schools cater to mainstream learners and Learners with Special Education Needs (LSEN), and these schools also serve as resource centres for surrounding schools in need of academic-related support. School B had learner enrolment of 765 learners and 24 teaching staff, accommodating boys and girls from grades R to 7. School C was categorised as quintile 3, a public ordinary school with learner enrolment of 1042 learners and 30 members of teaching staff, accommodating grades R to 7, including boy and girl learners.

All three schools had English as the language of learning and teaching (LoLT), a learner constituency from various cultural and religious backgrounds, with a range of socio-economic backgrounds, from child-headed households to two-parent homes, with either one or both parents being employed.

School A was located near an industrial area within an 8 km radius; schools B and C were in residential areas.

The schools were selected by the researcher because they shared common district officials and were often presented with similar challenges regarding the receipt of support at the school sites.

Based on their lived experiences, district officials face challenges that serve as obstacles to supporting school managers effectively. The study focused on 11 district officials overseeing curriculum and governance and 12 SMT members from three public primary schools within the Johannesburg North district.

4.4.2 Information on the 23 Participants

All participants in this study were employees of the Johannesburg North district in Gauteng Province's education district. The population of this study comprised a total of 23 participants. Among the 23 participants, 11 were district officials, and 12 were SMT members. These participants were organised into three separate cohorts, namely, cohorts A, B, and C. Cohort A was formed by two officials: the CMs and the IDSO. Cohort B included the nine SESs of various subjects from Grade R to 7. Cohort C had 12 participants, consisting of three SMT members in each focus group: one principal, one deputy principal, one foundation phase departmental head, and one intermediate/senior phase departmental head.

The non-probability sampling method utilised in this study was the purposive sampling method. The purposive sampling technique was the best-suited sampling method identified to be applied in this qualitative study. The participants selected were intentionally selected as the researcher identified them as most relevant to answering the research question. Purposive sampling allowed the researcher to select the most relevant participants for addressing the research questions.

4.4.2.1 Biographical information of the district officials

Table 4.3 displays the biographical information of cohorts A and B (11 participants), with pseudonyms used to label the participants; the average number of years of experience was 6 years.

Table 4.3: Biographical information on the 11 District Officials

Participants	Gender	Age	Experience (years)	Designation
Cohort A				
DO1	Female	56	1	Circuit Manager
DO2	Female	53	5	IDSO
Cohort B				
DO3	Female	46	5	SES FP
DO4	Female	48	6	SES FP
DO5	Female	51	6	SES FP
DO6	Female	53	7	SES FP
DO7	Female	64	11	SES FP
DO8	Female	37	4	SES Inter-Sen
DO9	Female	56	7	SES Inter-Sen
DO10	Male	59	10	SES Inter-Sen
DO11	Male	63	8	SES Inter-Sen

Key:

DO1-DO11 = District Official 1 to District Official 11

IDSO = Institutional Development and Support Officer

SES FP = Senior Education Specialist Foundation Phase

SES Inter-Sen = Senior Education Specialist, Intermediate and Senior Phase

4.4.2.2 Biographical information of the SMT members

Table 4.4 below presents the biographical information of the Cohort C participants, gender, age, and respective years of experience, along with the pseudonyms utilised in this study. Cohort C's 12 participants had an average of 5 years of experience in their current roles.

Table 4.4: Biographical information on the 12 SMT members

School	Participants	Gender	Age	Experience (years)	Designation
	Cohort C				
School A	SMT Member 1	Male	56	8	Principal
	SMT Member 2	Male	46	5	Deputy Principal
	SMT Member 3	Female	37	5	FP DH
	SMT Member 4	Male	39	3	Inter-Sen DH
School B	SMT Member 5	Female	53	1	Principal
	SMT Member 6	Female	43	3	Deputy Principal
	SMT Member 7	Female	31	2	FP DH
	SMT Member 8	Male	45	7	Inter-Sen DH
School C	SMT Member 9	Female	59	9	Principal
	SMT Member 10	Female	52	10	Deputy Principal
	SMT Member 11	Female	42	4	FP DH
	SMT Member 12	Female	46	6	Inter-Sen DH

Key:

SMT = School Management Team

FP DH = Foundation Phase Departmental Head

Inter-Sen DH = Intermediate and Senior Phase Departmental Head

4.5 THEMES**4.5.1 Theme 1: Roles and Responsibilities of District Officials**

Theme 1 addresses the first sub-question of the study: *“What are the roles and responsibilities of various district officials toward primary school management teams in Johannesburg North District?”* The theme emerged from the responses of participants and is rooted in the official job descriptions as outlined in the Personnel Administrative Measures (PAM, 2016).

The roles and responsibilities of district officials that emerged from the analysis included strategic planning, curriculum delivery and staff development.

4.5.1.1 Sub-theme 1.1: Strategic planning

Strategic planning emerged as one of the key responsibilities of district officials in their role of supporting SMTs. Their responsibilities, as the findings show, reflect structured and role-specific support functions that strengthen school leadership and management. Thus, this theme directly links to sub-question 1 of the study, highlighting the formal and practical expectations placed upon district officials concerning planning support for SMTs. Below are the participants' responses regarding the role of planning:

DO1: *"... we set targets to boost the areas we see room for improvement in..."*

DO2: *"...things like financing and maintenance and knowing where schools need to be resourced, that's where I guide the principals using the previous annum as a guide."*

DO4: *"With every subject, it's so important and guidance is always available to remain on par..."*

However, some participants differed in their view of the effectiveness of planning, as they expressed the following:

DO1: *"Changes in policies and updates in the form of new programmes that must be implemented in classrooms often create a bit of instability at first, but SMTs are capacitated to adapt and manage their teachers adequately."*

SMT Member 6: *"...when there are changes that must be made to timetables and curriculum, and assessments midway through the term and only affecting some grades. This thing makes what we do seem null and void and creates chaos."*

DO5: *"There is no one blueprint really, we all find ways to make it work for everyone and to the benefit, of course, of the learner at the end of the day..."*

The study's findings indicate that strategic planning functions at both the school and district levels occur on a quarterly and annual basis. However, despite the structured timelines and national directives from the Department of Basic Education (DBE) (2021), it has previously introduced unanticipated programmes during the school year. According to participant DO8,

SMTs are anticipated to implement new initiatives within the confines of policy frameworks and their unique school contexts. These findings suggest that while planning processes exist, they have been disrupted at times by top-down interventions intended to address curriculum-related backlogs, especially in the wake of systemic challenges such as the unexpected COVID-19 pandemic.

The mentioned curriculum interventions, such as the mathematics and English learning recovery programmes, although well-intentioned, often undermine pre-existing plans developed before the start of each school term. The implementation of such programmes not only requires contextual planning and adaptation by SMTs but also changes the daily activities of district officials, resulting in strain on time and resources. This systemic disruption highlights a point of contention. While the programmes aim to address learning losses, they simultaneously risk the consistency of long-term strategic objectives at both the district and school levels, along with their systemic implications.

The impact of these unforeseen disruptions emphasises the importance of coordinated and anticipatory planning by higher education authorities before engaging in planning at the school and district levels. If national and provincial departments fail to align new interventions with existing school-level plans, the result can be operational inefficiency and curricular dissonance. Therefore, the findings highlight the need for better synchronisation between strategic directives and implementation processes, ensuring that urgent interventions do not undermine the long-term educational goals of schools.

Priyambodo and Hasanah (2021) argue that when strategic planning is well resourced, it is fundamental to improving the overall quality of education. The DBE (2021) further asserts that planning is not optional but rather a compulsory function of district offices, underpinning the successful implementation of school functions. In line with this process are the School Development Plan (SDP) and the School Improvement Plan (SIP), which outline the actionable priorities over a three-year cycle. Once approved by the district office, these Whole School plans guide daily operations and serve as targets for monitoring and evaluation procedures.

The role of district officials is therefore twofold. As such, the role of district officials is to support and oversee the development of these plans and then to ensure that emerging programmes are integrated without disrupting existing priorities. In this context, strategic

planning is the link through which school functionality and policy implementation are well aligned (Priyambodo & Hasanah, 2021).

From a theoretical perspective, this sub-theme resonates with general systems theory (GST). As postulated by Von Bertalanffy (1972), the effectiveness of an organisation lies in the coordinated functioning of its interrelated components. In the education system, SMTs set goals, govern schools, and drive curriculum delivery, whereas district offices guide, monitor, and support these activities in alignment with broader provincial and national directives. Each component, namely, SMT, district, province, and national, interacts dynamically within a complex, open system. Similarly, disruptions within one component, such as the sudden introduction of new programmes in classrooms, inevitably affect other parts. This reinforces the GST principle that the health of the whole system is contingent upon the alignment and functionality of its interdependent parts (Kast & Rosenzweig, 1972).

In summary, strategic planning emerges as a critical yet vulnerable element of the education system. The success of planning depends on cohesive coordination across the various levels of the system, clarity of roles, and the provision of time and resources. These factors must be sustained to ensure that educational goals are met and avoid unplanned operational pressures in school districts.

4.5.1.2 Sub-Theme 1.2: Curriculum delivery

Curriculum delivery emerged as another key responsibility of district officials. As the primary function of schools, ensuring the quality dissemination of the curriculum is the key objective of school managers and district offices. The following discussions regarding the duties and responsibilities of district officials were recorded:

DO1: *“Focus is on the curriculum and how it can be improved at the institutions for excellent outcomes. We support the principal in prioritising and achieving that mission.”*

DO2: *“Ours is to assist and to hold accountable the school management to performance standards by working together to maintain an enabling environment for principals to run their schools well.”*

DO7: *“We are serving the schools by use of daily interactions with the managers of curriculum to ensure academic excellence.”*

DO11: *“My role connects the provincial mandate to the individual school’s practices to give our learners the best chance of access to knowledge, skills and values.”*

SMT Member 3: *“...as an SMT, we can acknowledge that district officials are knowledgeable of curriculum and are indeed subject experts.”*

SMT Member 1: *“A strength of the district, in my experience, is curriculum monitoring.”*

SMT Member 3: *“The curriculum support from the facilitators is of a high standard.”*

SMT Member 2: *“ATPs, lesson plans and assessment plans are provided by some facilitators. Getting these documents helps us know what their expectations of us are, and we can prepare accordingly.”*

The findings from this study indicate that the district officials participating in the research were formally appointed, experienced, and capacitated to perform their designated roles. The participants from both cohorts A and B emphasised their job descriptions and highlighted the significance of curriculum management within their professional mandate. As intermediaries between the Provincial Education Department (PED) and schools, district officials have a significant responsibility across diverse school contexts. The role of district officials encompasses SMT oversight and the provision of support to ensure that curriculum delivery remains aligned with policy expectations and learner needs.

The findings suggest that to sustain academic excellence within the Johannesburg North education district, district officials engage in methodical monitoring and ratification processes. These processes include the collation and analysis of learner performance data, curriculum coverage verification, and the identification of learners requiring additional academic support. Gentry (2021) states that methods used in school grouping, in other words, working within district jurisdictions, promote the sharing of good teaching practices, which ultimately empower SMTs and teachers inside and outside of the classroom. These regular district practices reflect an organised, data-driven approach to curriculum oversight, as these quarterly systems are implemented to ensure accountability and progress across all schools.

Notably, district officials also play a responsive role in mitigating the contextual challenges faced by SMTs. The challenges experienced varied from service delivery protests to load shedding and staff shortages. However, while tools and support systems are made

available to SMTs for tracking learner progress, some adverse school conditions limit the extent of district intervention. Nevertheless, officials continue to monitor curriculum implementation consistently and adjust their approaches to meet the specific needs of individual schools.

This finding is consistent with the Personnel Administrative Measures (2016), which mandates curriculum delivery and management as the core and primary responsibility of district officials. Moreover, in alignment with the GDE's vision and mission, district officials are required to remain proficient in new legislative developments and educational innovations (DBE, 2021). Dlungwane (2021) supports this perspective, asserting that safeguarding high-quality curriculum dissemination is a key responsibility of district offices in promoting the quality of education.

DBE (2021) maintains that curriculum delivery is the central function of schools and a vital oversight duty of district offices. Conversely, Bantwini and Moroosi (2018) challenge this notion by highlighting the reported limitations of some CMs. According to Bantwini and Moorosi (2018), school principals expressed a lack of school-based leadership experience among certain district officials, which hindered the effective management and implementation of curriculum management practices in schools.

The application of GST (Von Bertalanffy, 1972) offers a suitable lens through which to understand the findings of this study. Curriculum delivery and management activities represent an active interaction between the district office and schools as subsystems within the larger educational structure. The support and verification processes undertaken by district officials expose these parts of the system to one another, thus fostering interdependence and collaboration. Systemically, when one component (district office or school) functions effectively, it positively contributes to the overall output and well-being of the education system. Nevertheless, as noted by Kast and Rosenzweig (1972), when structural or contextual challenges exist within one component, they inevitably affect the performance of the entire system.

In summary, while district officials are capacitated and committed to their curriculum oversight roles, structural inequalities and resource constraints within schools can limit their effectiveness. However, the role of district officials remains pivotal for ensuring curriculum

delivery, policy alignment, effective learner support, and the realisation of quality education across the district.

4.5.1.3 Sub-Theme 1.3: Staff development

Staff development emerged as the third key responsibility of district officials. Emanating from the responses, participants in cohorts A and B – the CMs, IDSO, and SESs – had a full understanding of their responsibilities in staff development. The following discussions concerning staff development were recorded:

DO10: *“...As a facilitator, I provide guidance and additional support if needed for the subject and subject heads to be able to prepare lessons and assessments precisely.”*

DO2: *“...we step in to remedy the issue, keeping the main goal of the quality of education provided.”*

Some respondents shared their views concerning the lack of active staff development efforts:

DO1: *“We are inundated with various forms of support needed in many schools. We see the extreme and emergency cases first and work our way from there.”*

SMT Member 5: *“...there's a lack of cooperation within our SMT and we can't call ourselves a team, there's no intervention from the district, so we are on our own...”*

SMT Member 5: *“The dynamics within our school need assistance as we have had acting roles for a long time without official, sufficient training and orientation. Based on that, we need more flexible understanding and not compliance-only SSME visits.”*

SMT Member 3: *“Everything is about assessments and ratification and other deadlines. It is not about supporting and strengthening SMTs and teachers, it's about paperwork and accounting for why learners fail.”*

SMT Member 7: *“Our access to support is not free and open; we need to have more than just workshops and school visits, that's just not enough to guide us in running our phases and schools.”*

SMT Member 8: *“DHs are not adequately supported or monitored... We need help to get out of this rut because teachers can see that we are not a united front and that lessens our ability to forge a productive environment.”*

The findings of this study indicate that although district officials undertook staff development duties in addition to their roles, the implementation of these responsibilities did not adequately meet the specific developmental needs of SMTs. Although district officials reported meeting their job descriptions, SMT Members A, B, and C expressed dissatisfaction regarding specific needs, suggesting that contextual challenges within schools limited the significance and impact of the developmental initiatives. Notably, the SMTs emphasised the need for targeted staff development to address leadership and management gaps at the school level.

A key concern from the findings was the limited visibility and influence of the district-based support team (DBST), especially in assisting LSEN. Some Cohort C participants, as SMT members, specifically stated that they were neither trained nor authorised by the district office to perform the necessary assessments and referrals. This gap highlights a disconnect between policy intent and operational capacity in schools, with SMTs shouldering the burden of unfulfilled support responsibilities.

These findings indicate that the gap between district-level staff development initiatives and school-level needs reduces the effectiveness of district interventions. While staff development is seen as a strategic role of district offices, the absence of targeted, context-specific programmes diminishes its practical impact. This finding supports the view that successful staff development requires a nuanced understanding of and responsiveness to the diverse needs of schools rather than adopting a one-size-fits-all approach. The perceived lack of district reinforcement to address SMT-level deficiencies also suggests that although district officials may operate within their mandated roles, contextual realities significantly limit the effectiveness of their interventions. Therefore, the findings highlight a clear need for the district office to prioritise adaptive, needs-based support strategies that consider school-specific challenges.

This aligns with the perspective of the DBE (2021), which highlights that district offices are mandated to drive whole-school improvement and empower both principals and teachers. Furthermore, Akkus and Karakaya (2020) argue that onsite professional development visits are instrumental in enhancing teacher effectiveness. Their research suggests that strategic staff development not only fosters teacher growth but also makes a meaningful contribution to learner achievement. Likewise, Ahmed (2021) emphasises that sustained teacher

professional development directly correlates with improved school functionality and learner performance outcomes.

In this context, staff development serves as a key to strengthening the internal coherence of SMTs, enhancing school leadership, and increasing organisational efficiency. Ahmed (2021) noted that dysfunction within SMTs, often caused by inadequate training or poor synergy, can result in mismanagement, ultimately affecting a school's academic performance and overall compliance. Van Wyk and Marumuloa (2012) agree that policy implementation is central to the performance of the staff and school. Therefore, it benefits the district office to empower SMTs to promote systemic coherence and organisational effectiveness.

These findings are further supported by GST, as introduced by Von Bertalanffy (1972), which states that all parts of a system must operate in harmony for the entire system to succeed. In education, the interconnected roles of schools, district offices, and provincial departments create a system where each component's performance impacts the overall national outcome. Similarly, insufficient development of one part, such as SMTs, inevitably weakens the system's integrity (Kast & Rosenzweig, 1972). Thus, targeted staff development is not just a support activity but also a strategic necessity to uphold the strength and coherence of the larger education system. In conclusion, although district officials are procedurally fulfilling their staff development duties, these efforts fall short in addressing the complex and varied developmental needs of individual SMTs. Going forward, the district office needs to adopt a more context-aware and tailored approach to staff development, thereby improving its role in systemic educational progress.

4.5.2 Theme 2: District Officials' Methodologies to Support Primary Schools

The second motif, district officials' methodologies to support primary schools, emerged from the study's second sub-question: "How do district officials support primary schools in Johannesburg North district?"

The methods of support provided to primary SMTs that emerged from the analysis included school visits, classroom observations, cluster meetings and consultations.

4.5.2.1 Sub-Theme 2.1: School visits and classroom observations

The implementation of school visits and classroom observations emerged as a

methodology practised by district officials to support primary school managers. Below are the responses shared by the participants regarding the support disseminated to schools:

DO3: *“We have found that we must monitor formal assessment tasks because some papers given to learners are at a low standard, Bloom's Taxonomy is not observed, and some are not even moderated by SMT.”*

DO5: *“Daily efforts are made to reinforce the good that is done, but remember, we are a small team overseeing many schools. Our term calendars give us at least one day per school to monitor and support.”*

SMT Member 2: *“The school receives support as and when it is required from the district.”*

SMT Member 11: *“We are lucky to experience hands-on guidance from multiple officials, and we are well supported throughout the year.”*

SMT Member 9: *“If ever we encounter obstacles, we get good guidance on the approach to take; school visits are fruitful and leave us on better footing.”*

To further illustrate their lived experiences, Cohort C participants' responses regarding their perspectives on district officials' management of curriculum delivery and facilitation of other school functions were as follows:

SMT Member 4: *“District gives us once-off monitoring and little support throughout the year.”*

SMT Member 8: *“When we receive school visits and subject or SAT meetings is the only time there is contact between us and the district.”*

SMT Member 10: *“Absolutely no impact unless there's an issue.”*

SMT Member 12: *“We don't get support, we only see them when they come to look at files.”*

SMT Member 9: *“Yes, I can only call on them during mid-year and annual appraisal.”*

SMT Member 7: *“We are afraid of falling into the section 58B category. That will make us regress instead of progress, but we are not getting the assistance we need from the district; we are being met with deadline after deadline, meetings, school visits and submissions instead. It's all about paperwork.”*

The findings of this study showed that the SMTs involved in the focus group interviews had different experiences with the same district officials. Notably, SMTs A, B, and C reported regular contact with district officials through a combination of virtual and face-to-face interactions. These included subject-specific meetings, training sessions, and workshops held during academic terms. On-site visits were mainly scheduled during a particular term, with optional follow-up visits tailored to the developmental needs of individual schools. These findings suggest that district office support for SMTs was both structured and recurring; however, the quality and relevance of this support varied greatly across the sampled schools. This finding implies that the quality of support provided to SMT C was comparatively more effective than that received by SMTs A and B. DBE (2021) states that targeted support of schools in need must be addressed by school districts. Thus, the support was altered to be more aligned and specific to the contextual needs of the schools instead of a one-size-fits-all approach. Although district-school visits are intended to be developmental, several SMT members reported receiving criticism instead of constructive feedback or skills development.

This indicates a discrepancy between the intended purpose of oversight visits and the perceptions of the SMTs regarding the outcomes of these visits. Furthermore, the data highlight a critical need for bespoke and sensitive support that is tailored to specific contexts rather than employing a uniform, one-size-fits-all approach. The SMTs indicated that district visits frequently involved standardised assessments, curriculum coverage, compliance with school policies, teacher preparedness, review of learner work, and co-curricular programmes. Nonetheless, the particular contexts and challenges encountered by individual schools necessitate differentiated support strategies customised to their specific requirements. These implications emphasise that the effectiveness of district interventions could be enhanced through more meaningful engagement with each school's distinct realities. The findings showed that strengthening the capacity of SMTs requires a collaborative approach, wherein district officials transcend mere inspection to actively facilitate capacity-building through personalised feedback, mentorship, and targeted professional development.

Akkus and Karakaya (2020) distinguish between two types of support that schools receive from upper structures, namely, instrumental and instructional support. Instrumental support involves providing tools, resources, and advice, whereas instructional support offers

guidance, problem-solving strategies, and counselling to help school managers overcome challenges (Akkus & Karakaya, 2020). As additionally noted by sample schools A, B and C, during oversight visits, district officials usually evaluate three key areas: the performance of departmental heads (DHs) in managing curriculum and assessments; teachers' planning and preparation; and the quality and amount of learner work, often alongside classroom observations (DBE, 2021).

Similarly, the literature highlights the importance of classroom observations as a developmental tool. According to Akkus and Karakaya (2020), although initial resistance from teachers is common, when presented as supplementary rather than replacement practices, classroom observations can lead to the adoption of new, effective pedagogical strategies. Studies have shown that, over time, teachers recognised the value of these observations and reported tangible improvements in instructional delivery; therefore, when conducted constructively, observations can significantly enhance the quality of education (Akkus & Karakaya, 2020).

These findings align with the principles of GST, as postulated by Kast and Rosenzweig (1972) and Von Bertalanffy (1972), who view educational systems as interconnected components that function as a whole. The interaction between district officials and schools forms an essential feedback loop within this system, where information flows from office-based educators to school-based educators as implementers. Through these interactions, curriculum goals and policy directives are translated into practical classroom strategies and school practices. This implies that when the district office-to-school-level interaction is misaligned, the overall system output, which is learner achievement and school improvement, is potentially compromised.

Nevertheless, although district officials conduct routine school visits and establish support mechanisms, the findings of this study highlight the need for nuanced, context-aware engagements that focus on the developmental needs of SMTs. These findings suggest that for district support to be truly effective, district office efforts must go beyond compliance-based monitoring and foster capacity-building practices that promote sustainable school improvement and systemic coherence.

4.5.2.2 Sub-Theme 2.2: Cluster meetings and consultations

Cluster meetings and consultations emerged as the second sub-theme as a methodology applied by district officials to support SMTs. The topic of consistent and helpful aid was alluded to by Cohort B participants, such as SESs, who stated that, in general, schools individually received planned support, whereas specifically targeted schools were further assisted in their evident areas of need:

DO8: *“These meetings and trainings are for the benefit of the schools and, of course, the Departmental Heads are tasked to attend and relay the information and ensure there’s a management plan of how it will be implemented in their departments.”*

DO11: *“The managers do their best to comply, we know circumstances are not the same for all. For instance, some oversee 20 teachers, others have limited infrastructure and resources, others with 50 plus learners in a class, but they are skilled enough to deliver regardless.”*

SMT Member 2: *“There are hands-on subject facilitators who offer to come to see us coach subject teachers if there are any gaps that need to be filled; they are willing to extend themselves over their busy schedule.”*

It was noted that some district officials had satisfactory service delivery records from the experiences of some Cohort C participants; however, there were several exceptions:

SMT Member 10: *“We need more hands-on support... we don’t feel like we can depend on them as much as we should, especially with less experience in our roles.”*

SMT Member 2: *“It would benefit more of us and other SMTs if the district didn’t neglect us and maybe helped with team building and guidance on the cases we face with teachers and learners.”*

SMT Member 5: *“The problems within the staff and SMT specifically sometimes prevent teaching and learning in the school. The learning losses are real, and we need intervention, not judgement and monitoring.”*

SMT Member 6: *“As school managers, we often state in our SMT meetings that we need more consistent engagement from the district, not only once or twice a term.”*

The findings show that each school setting had different views on the importance and execution of cluster meetings and consultations facilitated by the district office. SMTs from

the three sampled schools (schools A, B, and C) reported diverse experiences, which were influenced mainly by their schools' socio-economic status and staff-related matters. Schools A and B faced major difficulties, especially staff shortages and socio-economic crises within their context, which increased their need for external support. Conversely, School C showed relatively better functioning and did not rely as much on district interventions. This variation suggests that relationships between schools and districts are not experienced uniformly and that school contexts greatly shape how effective district-led consultations are perceived. The Personnel Administration Measures (PAM) (2016) stipulates that office-based educators must possess effective communication skills, as well as staff development and transformation-focused competencies. This suggests that district officials should uniformly apply policies to all SMTs, irrespective of the varying school context.

The findings indicate that despite these differences, SMT members across schools A, B, and C faced the same expectations and standards from the district office. This highlights the tension between the standardised district procedures and the specific needs of individual schools. These findings imply that different approaches are needed when planning and conducting cluster meetings and consultations. Instead of a one-size-fits-all method, district officials should adopt strategies that respond to each school's unique needs. Targeted support, as described by the DBE (2021), as interventions and resources aimed at achieving specific developmental goals, is crucial to ensuring that SMTs can manage their schools effectively. While methods such as consultation meetings, cluster mediation workshops, and training sessions were generally helpful for curriculum implementation, their impact was reduced when they were applied as a blanket approach, without sensitivity to context. This suggests that schools in more complex or disadvantaged environments need more direct and ongoing support.

The findings also suggest that district officials should visit high-needs schools more often and conduct more in-depth consultations. When designed as professional development sessions, cluster meetings were well received and seen as beneficial for improving instruction. However, some types of support, such as infrastructure, funding, or large resource supplies, fall outside the district's scope and are handled at the provincial or national level. The findings, therefore, suggest that district officials focus on building capacity, meaningful oversight, and providing consultative support, all of which are delivered in ways that are responsive to immediate school needs. Gentry (2021) supports

the idea that personalised and follow-up support is vital for ongoing school improvement, as follow-up visits are especially important for monitoring how previous interventions were implemented. Gentry (2021) also notes that clustering schools provides a platform for collaboration, allowing schools to share resources, strategies, and expertise.

According to DBE (2021), policy stipulates that district officials' main roles include oversight and creating conditions that enable SMTs to operate effectively in their schools. However, this study revealed that participants in Cohort C experienced a support gap, mainly due to limited contact with district officials and insufficient teaching and learning resources. This was found to undermine the sustainable implementation of effective curriculum delivery and continued staff development. Furthermore, DBE (2021) outlines nine key areas in its National Policy on Whole-School Evaluation (2001), which collectively define what makes a school functional: (1) leadership, management and communication; (2) governance and relationships; (3) quality of teaching and learning; (4) educator development; (5) curriculum provision and resources; (6) learner achievement; (7) school safety; (8) security and discipline; infrastructure; and (9) community involvement. These areas are interconnected and essential for effective teaching and learning. The findings suggest that poor support in any of these areas, especially curriculum delivery, staff development, and overall school leadership and management, can negatively impact the entire school environment. More specifically, the findings also revealed that SMT A faced persistent school safety concerns, as evidenced by numerous unresolved incident reports, whereas SMT B encountered challenges related to school governance and stakeholder relationships. These critical focus areas are pivotal to the effective, stable functioning and sustainability of a school.

This interconnectedness aligns with Von Bertalanffy's (1972) GST, which views educational institutions as complex, interlinked systems. The GST suggests that subsystems, such as schools and district offices, depend on each other as parts of a larger structure, which is the national education system (Kast & Rosenzweig, 1972). The differing perspectives of cohorts A, B, and C show how different perspectives and realities can exist within the same system. Nevertheless, the success of the education system relies on cohesive coordination and communication among its parts.

In summary, while cluster meetings and consultations are essential district support practices, their efficacy depends on how well they are adapted to each schooling context.

The study's findings highlight the need for targeted, differentiated support based on a thorough understanding of each school's unique needs. The success of district strategies depends on their alignment with specific challenges and the developmental goals of the schools served by the district office.

4.5.3 Theme 3: Challenges of District Officials in Supporting SMTs

The third theme developed in this study is linked to the research sub-question: "*What are the challenges district officials encounter in supporting primary school management teams in Johannesburg North District?*" Research sub-question three, explored during the data collection process, sought to identify the obstacles faced by district officials.

The obstacles included factors that hindered district officials from effectively supporting their SMTs. From the perspective of district officials, several lived experiences were discussed. The findings indicate that the challenges faced by district officials in supporting their SMTs include a lack of resources and communication.

4.5.3.1 Sub-theme 3.1: Lack of resources

The first sub-theme of the third theme, labelled challenges of district officials, concerns resources. The accessibility and availability of resources act as an obstacle to providing the necessary ongoing support to SMTs. The participants in cohorts A and B of this study stated that they were knowledgeable that SMTs rely on them, as district officials, to varying extents to provide guidance. The responses presented below reflect the participants' notions concerning resources as a factor in their role:

DO4: "*We get remunerated to relieve us of travel costs, so we can request petrol for all the sites we visit, but it is not enough. R3 per kilometre doesn't match the price of litres of petrol used for the distance used for all the distance travelled.*"

DO10: "*Few officials get use of the state vehicles, there are not enough.*"

DO4: "*We at times need access to more resources to better and more efficiently complete our tasks.*"

DO6: "*...it can feel like we are overworked and under-resourced, some days you have to ask schools to help... the office has no electricity.*"

DO10: *“Some of us have needed IT to update the devices for more efficient running because they can cause delays.”*

DO3: *“...at times unable to make our copies and rely on nearby schools or SMTs to help. Sometimes there are power outages at the office and that can be very limiting.”*

On the other hand, some Cohort B participants reported having experienced no challenge in accessing resources needed to complete tasks:

DO7: *“We do receive resources that help us complete our work, such as phones and laptops. We are not under-resourced in that capacity.”*

DO4: *“I feel I am adequately supported by my team, as whenever there is an issue that’s reported, it is dealt with immediately, and we address it as we go.”*

The findings showed that the district office faced inconsistent access to critical resources, which affected the quality of support given to schools. Delays in school visits and other activities were caused by factors beyond the district office’s control, such as power outages that disabled office facilities, including particularly elevators, and disrupted internet services and labour-saving equipment such as printers and photocopiers. These issues not only hampered district office operations but also forced officials to work remotely from home or school sites. Limited access to basic resources negatively affects officials’ output and morale, reducing the effectiveness of support given to SMTs.

The study also highlighted that district officials often had to operate under difficult conditions, such as lacking fuel, paper, and technology, but still expected to oversee and guide instruction in schools. In some cases, SMTs help provide workspace or available resources to district officials when needed, showing a collaborative and problem-solving approach. This finding highlights the urgent need for education authorities to pay greater attention to, and prioritise, the needs of district officials to better support schools.

The findings further indicated that despite these challenges, district officials remained committed to fostering good relationships with SMTs and maintaining accountability for curriculum management and delivery. The resilience of district officials, despite limited resources, ensured that the education standards mandated by DBE were maintained. The findings suggest a need for better contingency planning by PEDs, especially in emergencies or infrastructural issues. According to DBE (2021), one of the key roles of

district offices is to improve school quality through guidance and support of SMTs. However, this role is severely constrained when district officials lack resources and cannot perform their duties effectively or consistently.

The implications of these findings are twofold. First, insufficient resources diminish the quality and frequency of district support and weaken the credibility and sustainability of school improvement efforts. Second, the quality of work from district officials is often compromised without essential tools and infrastructure, ultimately impacting school outcomes.

According to policy, the National Education Policy Act (DBE, 1996) requires district offices to respond to the needs of schools, especially underperforming or struggling offices. This aligns with the aims of the National Policy on Whole-School Evaluation (DBE, 2001), which deems resource allocation critical to evaluation and improvement processes. The policy promotes self-evaluation mechanisms supported by district offices, which are undermined when resources are lacking. Smith and Beckmann (2018) argued that school performance reflects the effectiveness of the district office, which is responsible for ensuring the implementation of education law and policy. When district officials cannot fulfil their support roles due to resource shortages, the teaching and learning quality of schools suffers (Smith & Beckmann, 2018).

These dynamics are explained well by Von Bertalanffy's (1972) GST, which sees education as a complex, interconnected system. Within this framework, district offices and schools are subsystems that must remain linked to keep the whole system functioning. Even when one part, such as the district office, faces limitations, the system adapts to maintain productivity. However, ongoing dysfunction in any subsystem, such as resource shortages, can strain the entire system's ability to meet its goals. The GST emphasises understanding the structural relationships within systems rather than just individual parts. However, this study revealed that despite resource limitations, the collaboration between district officials and SMTs helped sustain the system's functionality.

In summary, while district officials often managed to adapt to resource challenges, consistent and sufficient provision of physical, financial, and technological resources is essential for the district to fully meet its core responsibilities. For the broader education

system to perform well and fairly, resourcing strategies must reflect on-ground realities, ensuring that support for SMTs is both reliable and effective.

4.5.3.2 Sub-theme 3.2: Lack of communication

According to the DBE (2021), a facet of the district office role is to communicate openly with school managers; if the need arises, district officials may address the school communities and various stakeholders (DBE, 2021). Additionally, district offices act as the line of communication between the provincial legislature and school sites (DBE, 2021). In this subsection, aspects of the communication from and within the district office were shared by the participants:

SMT Member 6: *"...there is no collaboration between the different units in the district, units work in silos, which creates confusion."*

DO11: *"It might seem that we are doing nothing if we are not physically visible, but we are only a call or message away, we are available to consult and guide where we can."*

SMT Member 10: *"Delayed communication impacts the overall functioning and affects the curriculum that is delivered by the educators."*

DO6: *"Delays in signed memos or emails can at times affect how SMTs operate their phases, as timetable changes may have to occur, but we communicate meanwhile."*

SMT Member 5: *"...The communication seems one-sided and demanding, I don't feel an ease of access when seeking help and support in a specific area."*

SMT Member 12: *"The communication feels one way sometimes, receiving a same-day response would be appreciated and make a difference."*

Moreover, the district office was affected by logistical challenges, which presented issues regarding time, leading to delays in communication from the district to the school level:

DO7: *"...term calendars are disseminated to schools at the start of each term, yet for a term like this, we find it extremely difficult to conduct school visits when we have to be onsite at two venues across town from each other, invigilating and observing as that needs us to be thorough."*

DO9: *“It is a highly demanding position to be in. The deadlines also tend to be hostile as we receive communication now that by the end of the day, a document must be populated and sent in with the latest and most accurate school information.”*

The findings of this study indicate that communication between district offices and schools presents significant challenges, adversely affecting the quality of support provided to SMTs. Both school and district stakeholders reported delays, ambiguous messaging, and inconsistent directives, which hindered the timely and effective implementation of curriculum support and monitoring. Bantwini (2019) notes that systemic inefficiencies often impede district officials’ ability to meet schools’ support needs, a perspective aligned with the study’s findings. More specifically, delayed communication negatively influences participants’ experiences, productivity, and professional relationships.

A lack of synergy among district units, particularly between the curriculum delivery management unit and the inclusion and special schooling unit, resulted in contradictory instructions, creating uncertainty and disrupting implementation processes. Consequently, delayed and unclear communication disproportionately impacts underperforming schools, which receive support too late to meet national standards. Misalignment between district-level and provincial-level communication further hindered the execution of the curriculum programme. Additionally, heavy workloads and demanding schedules reduce opportunities for meaningful interactional and transactional communication with schools. While official documents such as memoranda and policy circulars remained the most reliable communication method, these were often delayed by lengthy approval processes. Conflicting directives between district units impaired SMTs’ ability to prioritise tasks, diminishing operational efficiency and accountability. These challenges underscore the importance of coherent horizontal communication within district offices and vertical communication between the district and school levels.

Drawing on Von Bertalanffy’s (1972) GST, it is evident that the education system functions optimally when all the components operate in harmony. In other words, communication breakdowns, whether due to unclear directives, delays, or misalignment, necessitate internal adjustments to maintain systemic balance. Therefore, improving the accuracy, timeliness, and coherence of communication channels is essential for enhancing SMT functionality, supporting curriculum delivery, and achieving national and provincial education standards.

4.5.4 Theme 4: Strategies Employed by District Officials to Address Challenges

The final theme that emerged from this study is linked to the following research question: *“What strategies do district officials use to address the challenges they encounter?”* The connection between the theme and sub-question is formed by the approaches exercised by the district office to overcome its obstacles in providing support to schools. The strategies implemented by district officials to overcome their challenges included planning and support, in addition to oversight and accountability.

4.5.4.1 Sub-Theme 4.1: Planning and support

The plan of action followed by district officials to curb the resource limitations they experienced while executing their duties was shared by respondents of cohorts A and B of this study; their experiences were shared as follows:

DO8: *“We encourage our SMTs to initiate and participate in PLCs with the neighbouring schools to build a community that can address challenges and gaps... It's a good way of finding out the good practices used by colleagues.”*

DO5: *“...expert teachers who practice the subject daily with learners and have a deep understanding of the complexities of each subject component and how to teach effectively, they assist other teachers within the context...”*

DO7: *“They are a useful aid in bridging gaps between what we pick up on as gaps in learner performance and where the subject teachers are in need.”*

DO4: *“...A building block in professional growth. As it says community, each member has the opportunity to develop themselves.”*

DO6: *“We also gain insights as the teachers are in classrooms daily and experience the changes in learners, environment, etc.”*

Findings from the study show that, faced with significant time constraints related to access to resources, district officials in Johannesburg North developed platforms to facilitate more immediate and effective curriculum support with SMTs. These platforms aimed to establish direct channels between district officials and school leaders, in particular, principalship and departmental heads, as subject heads. This strategy helps mitigate the negative effects of a lack of access to resources, allowing SMTs and school-based educators to remain informed and responsive to their schools' curriculum needs.

The findings indicated that through PLCs and lead teacher-facilitated workshops, district officials not only improved administrative efficiency but also encouraged active participation from SMTs in curriculum discussions. These timely and coordinated interventions enhanced the professionalisation of SMTs, giving them greater involvement in collaborative decision-making about teaching and management practices within their school contexts. The findings imply that district officials did more than simply issue mandates; they also fostered agency and leadership among SMTs through expanding their professional capacities.

Moreover, the findings revealed that SMT members were expected to empower both themselves and their staff. As school leaders, SMT members were seen not only as implementers of curriculum directives but also as co-contributors to educational progress within their institutions. These efforts allowed the district to maintain momentum in curriculum delivery despite infrastructural and logistical challenges. DBE (2021) noted that planning and support in schools are central to district functions, which include supervising curriculum implementation and providing feedback to schools and PEDs.

The findings confirm that the Johannesburg North district exercised these mandates by fostering collaborative dialogue, creating opportunities for reflective practice, and data-informed decision-making. More significantly, this approach involving PLCs and lead teachers supported the school-level autonomy of SMTs while reinforcing the district office's accountability, allowing compliance concurrently with school agency.

Additionally, the findings corroborate Kuntz and Carter's (2021) view that inclusive teaching practices lead to better learner engagement and teaching effectiveness. The district's focus on inclusive support is particularly relevant in its monitoring and support of ordinary, full-service, and special schools, promoting an adaptive, equitable leadership style. The planned support of PLCs and lead teacher-facilitated workshops created inclusive practices, such as opportunities for self-evaluation and improvement, the use of feedback from academic results, classroom observations, and consultations to refine support strategies (Kuntz & Carter, 2021).

Kusmawan, Rahmna, Anis, and Arifudin (2025) further state that there is a positive link between teacher involvement in curriculum development and learner achievement. The findings support this finding, demonstrating that collaborative communication between district officials and SMTs contributed to more effective curriculum practices. By fostering

transparency, shared ownership, and joint problem solving, the district office cultivated a culture of mutual responsibility for learning outcomes (Kusamawan et al., 2025).

Dar and Dar (2019) also argue that a combination of linear, interactional, and transactional communication models is most effective in complex education systems. The findings indicate that district officials employed these models flexibly and interchangeably, depending on the context and nature of their engagement. Dar and Dar (2019) emphasise that this layered communication approach can be crucial in managing stakeholder diversity, geographical spread, and administrative complexity.

In relation to the GST, the district office's strategies reflect a reorientation of systemic thinking, as outlined by Von Bertalanffy (1972). The GST posits that for a system to remain productive and adaptable; it must adjust its parts in response to changing conditions. The creation of interactive communication platforms exemplifies this principle, showing how a system, under pressure, can reconfigure its internal relationships and processes to maintain efficiency and continue achieving desired outcomes, namely, effective teaching and learning (Von Bertalanffy, 1972).

4.5.4.2 Sub-Theme 4.2: Oversight and Accountability

As a core duty and responsibility of district officials, the oversight and accountability of schools were applied as a strategy for district officials to overcome the challenges faced in providing the support needed by SMTs. To counter communication obstacles, district officials subsequently formed interactive subject platforms. Below are the responses from the participants of cohorts A and B of this study concerning the implemented hands-on overseeing and accounting processes of schools:

DO4: *"It is interactive, so we can answer questions when we see them, also their fellow DHs can answer if they know..."*

DO11: *"...we relay pertinent information as we receive and ensure we verify it as we must account for results."*

DO5: *"...can complete school surveys without going to each site or waiting for emails to be read. This works best as managers are busy in classrooms, they are too occupied to peruse and answer emails during contact hours."*

DO9: *"...accountability and evaluation are an important aspect of the role we play to serve our schools and that we cannot run away from."*

Although efforts have been made by district officials to actively communicate with school managers and teachers, an alternative perspective was shared by Cohort C participants:

SMT Member 4: *"It would be in the best interests of the district, GDE and the DBE to involve SMT members in the drafting of ATPs. As we know and understand the subjects taught daily in class, and what is realistic and relevant. Some of the people creating these documents we must follow have not been in classes for a long time now. We've seen that what is in the district or provincial assessments isn't what is in the ATPs for that grade or term. It just doesn't speak to each other."*

DO8: *"...all due processes are followed by the classroom teacher, school management and the district office."*

However, within the same cohort (C), another participant expressed that the prerogative was on each individual as a professional to extend their skills to better address gaps in the academic curriculum and school management.

SMT Member 10: *"Sometimes we create our barriers by not upskilling and empowering ourselves but expecting the higher-ups to solve problems on the ground."*

SMT Member 7: *"We need them to understand the difficulties and not paint every school with the same brush 'cause the contexts are very different."*

The findings revealed that communication between district offices and schools presented significant challenges, which negatively affected the quality of support provided to SMTs. Concerns emerged from both the school and district levels regarding delays, unclear messaging, and inconsistent directives. Consequently, these communication barriers hinder the timely and effective implementation of curriculum support and monitoring. The use of cluster-based communication systems, which group schools into manageable networks, proved especially effective in promoting consistent sharing of knowledge and providing quicker feedback within the district.

Bantwini (2019) highlights that district officials often struggle to meet the support needs of schools due to systemic inefficiencies. This aligns with the findings of this study, indicating that delayed communication negatively impacts participants' experiences, productivity, and

professional relationships. A key factor was the lack of synergy among units within the district office, more specifically, the curriculum delivery management and inclusion and special school units, which issued contradictory instructions, leading to confusion and breakdowns in the implementation processes. One implication of these findings is that communication delays caused late support delivery, especially to underperforming schools, such as School A in this study, preventing them from fully meeting national standards due to insufficient time and clarity to implement necessary interventions. The misalignment of communication between district units and the provincial office further hindered the execution of curriculum programmes in schools, contributing to limited opportunities for effective interactional and transactional communication with schools.

Cohort C (SMTs A, B and C) reported frequent instances of delayed or unclear communication, often caused by the district office waiting for confirmation or documents from the provincial or national levels. These delays affected school operations, including the timely development of timetables and activity plans. Despite these difficulties, cohorts A, B, and C agreed that official documentation, such as memoranda, circulars, and policy directives, remained the most consistent and reliable form of communication. However, even these events are often delayed due to prolonged sign-off processes, causing schools to receive critical information too late for timely action.

The lack of cohesion in messages from district units directly impacts SMTs' ability to act decisively in their schools. For example, conflicting instructions from the inclusion and special schools unit and the curriculum delivery management unit left school leaders uncertain about which directives to prioritise, affecting operational efficiency and accountability. These findings emphasise the importance of both horizontal and vertical communication within education systems. According to Dar and Dar (2019), communication occurs through various types, namely, organisational, directional, and expressive. Additionally, communication occurs through different models, including linear, interactional, and transactional models (Dar & Dar, 2019). The findings suggest that while linear communication through the use of official documents was maintained, significant breakdowns occurred in interactional and transactional models of communication, which are vital for dynamic, two-way feedback and collaborative problem solving (Dar & Dar, 2019).

Dar and Dar (2019) further emphasise that communication in the education sector should be strategic and purposeful, given its largely instructional nature. As such, the accuracy, efficiency, and effectiveness of communication between different levels directly influence school outcomes. Therefore, the lack of streamlined and coordinated communication within the district office hampers the system's ability to support school improvement efforts.

The GST (Von Bertalanffy, 1972) posits that all components within a system must function harmoniously to maintain a systemic balance. In terms of communication, the GST suggests that organisations constantly interact with their environment. Effective communication between schools, district officials, PEDs, and DBE is crucial for system synergy and functionality. When disruptions occur, such as unclear directives or misaligned communication, internal adjustments are necessary to maintain system stability.

In summary, while district officials demonstrated resilience in navigating communication barriers, the findings highlight the need for improved coordination and clarity in both horizontal (within various district office units) and vertical (the district office and schools) communication structures. For systemic improvement, education departments must prioritise efficient mechanisms that facilitate timely, accurate, and coherent information sharing. This will enable schools to implement strategies effectively and meet the educational standards outlined in national and provincial policies.

4.6 CONCLUSION

This chapter addressed the research questions, aims, and objectives by presenting and analysing the key findings of the study. A thematic analysis approach was selected as the most suitable data analysis method, enabling the identification of patterns and themes directly linked to the research sub-questions. The chapter additionally examined each theme and sub-theme concerning the roles and responsibilities of district officials, the approaches they adopted, the challenges they faced, and the strategies they used to overcome those challenges.

The findings were grounded in the perspectives of the study's participants across three groups, namely, cohorts A and B (district officials) and Cohort C (school management teams), whose responses were thoroughly analysed to derive meaning and implications.

These insights were then contextualised within the literature and available policy frameworks, which are all utilised by the DBE, and further interpreted through the lens of the GST. The application of the GST helped demonstrate how different components within the educational system interact to produce adaptive and coordinated responses to systemic pressures.

Overall, this chapter presented the crucial role that the district office plays in supporting curriculum delivery, managing limited resources, and fostering constructive communication and collaboration across schools in the Johannesburg North district. These findings provide a solid foundation for the conclusions and recommendations in Chapter Five, which consolidate the study's outcomes and offer practical recommendations for improving district-level support in public primary schools.

CHAPTER 5: SUMMARY, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUSIONS

5.1 INTRODUCTION

Chapter 4 presented the analysis and interpretation of the study's data. Chapter 5 provides a summary of the findings, discusses the conclusions, and offers practical recommendations based on the study's outcomes.

This study aimed to explore the roles and responsibilities of Johannesburg North district officials in supporting primary school management teams (SMTs). Through purposive sampling, 23 participants were selected as suitable respondents. This qualitative study was conducted through semi-structured focus group interviews, individual interviews, questionnaires and document analysis. The rationale for conducting this study was to provide an account of the perspectives of district officials and the challenges they encounter when delivering district-based supportive services to schools.

To guide the researcher in gauging a better understanding, the research – which served as a template for deeper, more detailed questioning during data collection – included the following objectives:

- To explore the roles and responsibilities of district officials toward primary school management teams in Johannesburg North District.
- To determine how district officials support primary schools in the Johannesburg North district.
- To understand the challenges district officials encounter in supporting primary school management teams in Johannesburg North District.
- To establish the strategies that district officials use to address the challenges they encounter.

5.2 IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

The implications of a study highlight its significance and relevance within the context of its field by attempting to provide a link between theory and application in everyday experiences

(Hassan, 2024). Thus, there is a need to discuss the potential of this study to make an impact in future drafts of guidelines, practices and studies.

5.2.1 Theoretical Implications

This study contributes to the education field because its purpose is to expand the understanding of the role of district officials and gain insights into the challenges faced in facilitating support for school managers. This study revealed that district officials encounter obstacles in guiding and reinforcing curriculum delivery and management in schools. These obstacles were primarily due to external factors, including access to resources and communication constraints. The findings of this study may inform further research in broader contexts, such as nationally or internationally, and provide policymakers with insights to inform any necessary amendments.

The findings of this study align closely with the principles of general systems theory (GST), as articulated by Von Bertalanffy (1972). This theory posits that organisations, including educational institutions such as schools, operate as interconnected systems wherein the whole exceeds the sum of its components. Therefore, schools cannot be comprehensively understood in isolation; rather, they must be examined within the context of the wider district structures that support and influence their operations (Akkus & Karakaya, 2020). The findings of this study verify and expand on the notion of the GST that the interconnectedness and alignment of subsystems with the main system are essential for effectiveness.

The findings further highlight challenges in curriculum delivery and staff development and demonstrate that when a subsystem within a school, such as cohesion within an SMT, is weakened, it disrupts the functioning of the entire system. SMT B's governance challenges illustrate how unresolved issues in a single area can have cascading effects across the school environment, confirming the emphasis of the GST on the interdependence of different components.

Furthermore, GST emphasises that systemic change necessitates alignment across all interconnected components (Von Bertalanffy, 1972). The findings indicate that district officials should perceive SMTs not only as administrative entities but also as multifunctional subsystems within the broader education framework, as suggested by Kast and Rosenzweig (1972).

Therefore, strengthening district support to schools through leadership and management skills training, governance guidance, and enhanced operational procedures is not an isolated action but a systemic strategy aimed at improving overall school performance.

The GST also stresses the importance of feedback mechanisms for the sustainability and adaptation of a system (Von Bertalanffy, 1972). The study's results revealed deficiencies in communication channels between district officials and SMTs, where limited feedback, for example, undermined system learning and adaptability. This finding substantiates the view that, in the absence of timely and structured feedback, schools tend to be reactive rather than strategically adaptive systems (Priyambodo & Hasanah, 2021).

5.2.2 Implications for Practice

As this study took place in the Johannesburg North district, implications for practice suggest that research be conducted into district units beyond curriculum delivery and management, as well as other district offices in different contexts. District units act as branches that focus on overseeing various aspects of the DBE, including policy, finance, infrastructure, and human resources.

The findings of this study indicated that district officials adapted to changes in their environment, and various strategies were implemented to overcome the challenges faced, ensuring that schools received the necessary oversight and reinforcements. The adaptations made by district officials included creating interactive platforms to communicate information on time to school managers and implementing collaborative efforts with teachers through the use of professional learning communities (PLCs). This strategy aided in countering resource challenges such as consultations and did not incur additional site visits, travel costs, or the use of physical resources such as paper, ink and printers.

This study's findings suggest implications for practice, indicating that collaboration between schools and districts is beneficial for the quality of teaching and learning outcomes. Collaborative practices can improve instruction and overall learner performance (Gentry, 2021). The findings indicate that school managers experienced professional development through PLCs and workshops with lead teachers. As a practical implication, this integrational practice between schools and the district office can be applied to advance teaching and managerial practices beyond the district level.

5.2.3 Implications for Policy

As a policy-oriented implication, this study recommends that the managers of district offices address the aspects that present challenges for district officials. This can be accomplished by applying the study's findings to enhance practices and enable informed decision-making during strategic planning and policy formulation. Priyambodo and Hasanah (2021) emphasise that adequately resourced strategic planning is vital for increasing the quality of education from policy to practice, thereby aligning policy implementation with school functionality.

Furthermore, school governing bodies may utilise the findings from this study to incorporate new knowledge into their operational procedures and school policies, thereby allowing administrative, teaching, and managerial staff to adapt and improve their operational models and overall school functionality. Additionally, the findings are consistent with those of previous research, highlighting that system inefficiencies hinder district offices from adequately meeting the needs of SMTs and suggesting the need for district offices to receive the necessary support and development from provincial and national structures (Bantwini, 2019).

5.3 SUMMARY OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

A growing body of literature has indicated that district support in schools is inadequate (Bantwini & Moroosi, 2018). The role played by district officials in primary schools has been scrutinised as the decentralised education system determines that district offices should aid schools and reinforce school leadership and management.

The main aim of this study was to explore the roles and responsibilities of Johannesburg North district officials and the challenges confronted when supporting primary SMTs. The findings highlighted a very integral aspect of district–school relations, which may positively alter the perspectives of both parties and ultimately benefit their interactions and thus overall dynamics.

These findings and conclusions are linked to the problem statement of the study. Following the problem statement, an evaluation of recent South African literature revealed that the success of schools correlates with the nature of support received from their districts, as highlighted by Bantwini and Moroosi (2018). The study's objectives provided a framework to

guide the formation of the research questions, which generated the themes of this study. The key outcomes, presented according to each theme, are presented in summary form below:

5.3.1 Roles and Responsibilities of Various District Officials

The first theme examined the roles and responsibilities of district officials regarding the SMTs of primary schools. The findings revealed that various government publications and documents are utilised by the DBE in assigning job descriptions to various district officials in line with their job titles.

5.3.1.1 Strategic planning

The findings show that the core responsibilities of district officials mandate them to prioritise serving schools most in need of assistance in terms of planning, support, oversight, accountability and public engagement (DBE, 2025). The primary role of district officials, as mandated by the DBE, is to provide guidance and support to school managers, ensuring high-quality teaching and learning in safe educational institutions. As such, the GST suggests that schools as subsystems depend on the open-system nature of interactions with the district level to acquire the necessary support (Von Bertalanffy, 1972). As office-based educators, officials are tasked with bridging the gap between school sites and provincial education legislation and programmes.

5.3.1.2 Curriculum delivery

Through document analysis, the scope of the senior education specialists (SEs), the circuit manager, and the institutional development and support officer (IDSO) was examined to determine their responsibilities in schools (Personnel Administrative Measures, 2016).

This indicates that district offices are accountable for curriculum delivery and management in schools and the oversight and guidance of SMTs and serve as the administrative link between the GDE and individual schools in the province. Likewise, the GST suggests that within a system, different components exist and work cooperatively (Von Bertalanffy, 1972). This is evidenced by the conduct of the SMTs of the sampled schools and the district officials.

5.3.1.3 Staff development

The study's findings show that the district office is accountable to teachers, learners, school governing bodies (SGBs) and school communities at large. Similarly, learners are attended to by district officials conducting classroom observations to verify that teaching is in line with subject-specific ATPs. Second, in supporting teachers and SMTs, district officials identify teacher development programmes that aid in improving areas of weakness and improving the pedagogy of teachers.

Similarly, district officials employ policies to address and mediate issues in schools. In addition, the findings revealed that productive relations between schools and parents through stakeholder platforms such as SGBs were reinforced by district officials. Dlungwane (2021) suggests that district officials' roles include working collaboratively with school managers to guide and enhance the quality of education in South African schools. Similarly, GST asserts that a functioning system requires alignment across all interconnected components (Von Bertalanffy, 1972).

Moreover, as the role of district officials is multifaceted, findings also indicate that officials are mandated to interact with the provincial office and continuously expand their skills and knowledge to serve schools and benefit the education system, as highlighted by Dlungwane (2021). Overall, the quality of academic output in schools is correlated with the level of support received from the district office. Van Der Voort and Wood (2016) concur that the role of district officials is to ensure effective curriculum dissemination and the functionality of schools. In other words, the level of involvement of the district office with school managers, the upskilling of subject teachers, the provision and use of learning and teaching support materials (LTSMs), and overall school governance are parallel to the degree of a school's effectiveness.

5.3.2 How District Officials Support the Primary Schools

The second theme examined how district officials support primary schools within the Johannesburg North district. The findings revealed that in helping primary school teachers and SMTs, district officials track, monitor and support the work and progress of teachers at institutions.

5.3.2.1 School visits and classroom observations

This study's findings show that the monitoring of SMTs is conducted primarily through the utilisation of tools, with in-class monitoring of teaching practices also guided by these tools. This suggests that these tools (school visits, classroom observations, cluster meetings and consultations) are mandated by the GDE as a strategy to direct and administer the quality of teaching and learning delivered in schools (DBE, 2025). The National Policy on Whole-School Evaluation, published in 2001, states that a form of supporting SMTs is the external Whole School Evaluation (EWSE) quality assurance process. These monitoring and support visits are generally conducted based on self-evaluation results. This indicates that these forms of inspection are conducted to provide guidance for improvement during future school and class visits and work toward school improvement.

5.3.2.2 Cluster meetings and consultations

Through the EWSE quality assurance system, district officials of Johannesburg North provide aid and reinforcement to SMTs and teachers. This is accomplished by facilitating subject meetings, workshops, cluster meetings, and training relevant to the development of the school-based professional. At the school level, district officials also facilitate and encourage PLCs. The PLCs are at a rudimentary level and are informally conducted, promoting more insightful and consistent engagement on very detailed topics addressed in depth during ongoing PLCs.

According to the National Policy on Whole-School Evaluation (2001), an important aim of this form of support is to provide feedback to district professional services. Additionally, to identify the key aspects that create effective schools, this policy is applied as an EWSE. According to Von Bertalanffy (1972), the GST posits that the functioning of a system requires a balance among all the components within the broader system.

Moreover, how best to support schools, which areas to prioritise, and how to identify areas of good practice to serve as models form part of the aims of this policy, which should be implemented in practice, as posited in the National Policy on Whole-School Evaluation (DBE, 2001). However, as mentioned by SMT Member 5, in schools with newly appointed principals, it is important to ensure that they are performing their duties in accordance with the expectations outlined in their job descriptions. This monitoring and support visit is regarded as crucial in determining the level of functionality of the role of the head of the

school and the general operations of the school in all nine focus areas. The focus areas inspected and pivotal to quality assurance support visits include (1) the basic functionality of a school; (2) leadership, management and communication; (3) governance and relations; (4) quality of teaching and learning; (5) teacher development; (6) curriculum supply and resources; (7) learner achievement; (8) school safety, security and discipline; (9) general school infrastructure; and (10) parents and the community. The officials conducting EWSE visits support the head of a school in delivering quality education (DBE, 2001).

5.3.3 Challenges Faced by District Officials

The third theme of this study addressed the challenges that district officials face in delivering support to SMTs. The findings show that the chief obstacle noted by the sampled district officials was the limitations regarding resources and communication accessibility to aid the officials in advancing their work in schools. These constraints are a barrier to teacher development opportunities, as engagements are limited.

5.3.3.1 Lack of Resources

The findings revealed that some district officials experienced difficulties concerning access to the resources needed to complete their duties. This indicated that the district office was without resources, such as electricity, and thus had less access to the internet and printing. This suggests that district officials often have to use their resources or make requests to schools.

Moreover, the findings revealed that the district officials involved in the study experienced constraints regarding the availability of access to resources, impacting the quality of support experienced by SMTs. Similarly, Von Bertalanffy (1972) asserts that to maintain equilibrium within a broader system, the lack of adequate external inputs, such as access to resources, can cause components to struggle to maintain balance.

5.3.3.2 Lack of Communication

The findings further indicate that clashes in office or school site duties scheduled for district officials resulted in delayed school visits, thereby hindering the general and targeted support schools require. This hampered the ability of officials to deliver onsite support and to foster productive relations with SMTs. This finding indicates that, with time as a

challenge, the implementation of mass-based programmes has impacted school timetables and proved challenging for SMTs to implement in a timely manner. This situation was a challenge for district officials, as they facilitated mediations and had the duty to ensure implementation in schools. Likewise, the findings indicated that circulars were delayed in their dissemination to schools, which resulted in delayed mediation of SMTs and implementation in schools.

5.3.4 Strategies used to Address the Challenges

The final theme explored the strategies that the district officials involved in this study used to address the challenges encountered. The findings revealed that proactive planning and open communication were implemented by district officials to enhance order in district-school relations.

5.3.4.1 *Planning and Support*

The findings revealed that the district office regularly engaged in proactive planning and that quarterly planning was disseminated to schools promptly. This indicated that SMTs were well prepared for school visits, cluster meetings and workshops ahead of time. This suggested that the strategy implemented was effective in addressing the challenge of resource constraints, leading to delayed action.

Similarly, the district office collaborated with teachers in conducting PLCs and implemented lead teachers as a tool to enhance teaching strategies and methodologies in classrooms. This finding indicates that district officials and SMTs can communicate openly in real time without delay. This suggests that collaborative platforms were utilised for consultations and to verify and elaborate upon information disseminated to schools.

The findings further indicated that schools within the vicinity or experiencing a school visit were able to provide resources to district officials who were in need. This indicates the challenge of accessing resources, suggesting that obstacles were addressed by SMTs and district officials as a direct solution to completing daily tasks. The study's findings suggest that resource limitations are subdued by collaborative efforts between SMTs and district officials, as schools are accommodating district officials' needs through their involvement in PLCs and lead teacher-facilitated workshops. The implementation of these two strategies demonstrates that district officials are able to address obstacles through collaborative and

sustainable approaches (Gentry, 2021). Moreover, schools, as subsystems, effectively manage the implementation of strategies, creating mutually beneficial relationships between schools and districts within the broader education system (Von Bertalanffy, 1972).

The district office plays a critical role in equipping school managers through targeted support and effective oversight, ensuring that schools operate efficiently and adhere to national educational standards (DBE, 2021). Systematic support is central to enabling district officials to identify obstacles, assess outcomes, and implement timely interventions that enhance school leadership and curriculum implementation (National Education Policy Act, 1996). The monitoring, support and evaluation process provides the foundation for targeted support and prevents school managers from becoming isolated when addressing systemic challenges. The Whole-School Evaluation Policy of 2001 states that the evaluation of school managers becomes equitable and constructive only after robust support has been provided, sustained monitoring has taken place, and additional assistance has addressed identified needs. This integrated approach aligns accountability with capacity-building, enabling schools to improve performance within a fair and supportive system.

5.3.4.2 Oversight and Accountability

The findings revealed that the strategies applied by district officials to counteract communication constraints, such as interactive WhatsApp groups, aimed to eliminate delayed communication to schools and promote open and flexible communication. The interactive communication platforms were introduced to SMTs in the form of separate WhatsApp groups for departmental heads, deputy principals and principals for each circuit of schools under the district. These groups additionally allowed for one-on-one communication access to individual SMT members. The implementation of these two strategies enabled the district officials to provide the necessary support to their designated primary schools regardless of the challenges presented.

5.4 CRITICAL APPRAISAL OF THE STUDY

To assess the methodology, validity and trustworthiness of a study within a relevant context, Tod, Booth and Smith (2021) assert that the benefits and shortfalls of a study are attributed to the value that a study can contribute to a field.

5.4.1 Strengths of the Study

The strengths of the study can be summarised as follows:

- The study is qualitative, allowing the meaning of behaviour to be interpreted from a given context (Almeida, Faria & Queirós, 2017).
- Semi-structured data collection enabled rich, detailed descriptions from all participants.
- The inclusion of participants from three cohorts (A, B, and C) allowed for diverse perspectives from both school- and office-based educators.
- The depth of participant descriptions provided insight into complex realities, highlighting contrasts and similarities in their lived experiences.
- Multiple research instruments (focus groups, individual interviews, questionnaires, and document analysis) were used, enhancing the trustworthiness of the findings.
- The findings can inform improvements in policies, particularly regarding district–school relations and operations.
- The challenges identified in the study provide insights for provincial and national education structures.
- The collective perspectives of school- and office-based educators support the literature and highlight the need to address district office challenges.
- The positive practices identified in the study, such as open communication channels and collaborative professional development, such as PLCs and lead-teacher facilitated workshops, can serve as models for other districts beyond Johannesburg North.

5.4.2 Limitations of the Study

According to Faber and Fonseca (2014), the limitations of a study highlight the external bounds of the conducted research. Similarly, Creswell (2014) explains the limitations of a study as the potential weaknesses of the study that the researcher cannot control.

The limitations experienced by the researcher in this study are explained below:

Time constraints, as all participants were occupied during the same hours. The researcher thus arranged to conduct interviews after work hours, between lessons and meetings at the convenience of the participants. The small sample size of the study, a total of 23 participants, limits the extent of insight gained, as this implies that the conclusions of the study limit the study's ability to apply its findings in comparable situations. However, the findings illustrate the lived experiences of the participants. Furthermore, Faber and Fonseca (2014) suggest that a small sample size may influence the findings of research, as it increases the likelihood of assuming a premise incompatible with other similar settings. Similarly, the small sample size affects the external validity of the study, which indicates that the findings cannot be generalised to all district populations. This is because not all districts experience the same context; thus, they do not share the same experience with the phenomenon of district-and-school relations. However, the findings, which are relevant to the practical realities of schools, can inform districts of challenges and guide potential directions for future practice.

5.4.3 Delimitations of the Study

The delimitations of a study denote the boundaries that define the scope of the study (Creswell, 2014). In this study, the delimitation is geographical, as the schools in the Johannesburg North district are divided into different clusters, and the Cohort C sample of this study was selected from the same cluster. This constrained the range of data collected and guided the focus of the interpretation of findings, acting as a boundary of this study.

Although the findings of this study show data emanating from the Johannesburg North district, the findings may be relevant to other districts and SMTs by informing practices that curb the impact of challenges and promote positive practices.

5.5 RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations of this study are based on the findings and conclusions of this study. This study explored the roles and responsibilities of district officials toward primary school managers.

- District officials in Johannesburg North support primary school SMTS through methods such as monitoring, feedback, and evaluation to manage curriculum delivery (DBE, 2025). This study highlights the need for leadership development, including mentoring and training in strategic planning, conflict resolution, and management, to empower leaders, aligning with the literature suggesting that professional development is vital for effective schools (Priyambodo & Hasanah, 2021).
- Interschool collaboration, such as the Gauteng School Twinning Programme launched in 2018, promotes resource sharing and problem solving, fostering school empowerment. Reviving this programme could increase academic excellence, as district officials facilitate its sustainability. Gentry (2021) notes that professional collaboration affects school practices.
- This study also supports the implementation of well-being initiatives to help staff manage stress and improve productivity, as well-being has a positive effect on school environments (Van Der Voort & Wood, 2016).
- Additionally, the Data-Driven Districts online platform can be used to analyse staff, student, attendance, and performance data to identify development needs before site visits, improving subject performance, overall success, and accountability through ICT integration (DBE, 2025).

5.5.1 Some Recommendations for Future Studies

For future studies, this study recommends that an in-depth examination of the other units at district offices and their responsibilities to schools be conducted. This can aid in promoting good, sustainable practices in school districts. Additionally, the knowledge of factors inversely affecting the output of district officials can be addressed by provincial offices. This understanding of district office and school relations can inform provincial offices and the DBE of areas in need of intervention. Additionally, these data can also be used to generate sustainable strategies to ensure quality teaching and learning in all schools and districts across South Africa.

Overall, the recommendations of this study emphasise the importance of SMTs receiving quality support in fostering effective curriculum delivery. Accordingly, SMT members, district officials and provincial offices can utilise these data to promote more engaging practices from the school to the national level.

It is recommended that the findings of this study be applied to enhance productive engagement between schools, district offices and provincial offices.

5.6 CONCLUSION OF THE STUDY

This study aimed to explore the roles and responsibilities of district officials in supporting primary school management teams in Johannesburg North District. The purpose, significance, aims, and research questions emphasise the critical role of district support in strengthening school leadership and management. Additionally, the study provided a comprehensive review of the literature on district officials' roles, SMT functionality, leadership challenges, and best practices, highlighting gaps in targeted interventions. Furthermore, qualitative methodology was used to generate triangulated data while addressing ethical considerations and credibility. The findings were subsequently presented and analysed through a thematic approach, interpreted through GST to illustrate the interdependence of district structures and school operations. Finally, the study concludes by presenting practical recommendations, highlighting the pressing need for more robust district support mechanisms to empower SMTs, strengthen curriculum delivery, and ultimately improve overall school effectiveness.

This study critically examined the challenges encountered by district officials in their efforts to support primary SMTs. The findings illuminate the multifaceted roles and responsibilities undertaken by district officials, alongside the strategies implemented to guide and capacitate SMTs. Furthermore, the study identified key challenges that hinder effective district-level support and explored the mechanisms employed to mitigate these obstacles.

Based on the implications derived from the research findings, several recommendations have been proposed to inform future studies and to guide district offices, schools, SMTs, and other educational stakeholders. These recommendations aim to enhance the functionality of SMTs and contribute to the overall effectiveness of schools within the broader educational landscape. This study aimed to explore the challenges faced by district officials in supporting primary SMTs and the strategies used to improve school functioning within a resource-limited context. Guided by GST, this study provided a framework for understanding the interconnectedness of educational subsystems, especially the relationship between district offices and SMTs.

The study employed a qualitative approach, using thematic analysis of focus group interviews, individual interviews, questionnaires, and document analysis.

The findings of the study suggest that inadequate support in critical operational domains, particularly curriculum delivery, staff development, and whole-school leadership and management, has the potential to significantly undermine the overall functioning of a school. Such deficiencies do not operate in isolation but rather permeate multiple aspects of school life, creating systemic challenges that impede effective teaching, learning, and organisational cohesion. Specifically, the findings indicated that SMT B experienced difficulties in governance processes and interpersonal relationships within the school community. These areas are not peripheral but are, in fact, central to sustaining a stable, productive, and effective school environment. The interconnected nature of these challenges highlights the imperative for targeted, responsive, and sustained support mechanisms that directly address the unique needs of each school context.

This study critically examined both local and international studies, identifying gaps, especially regarding district interventions in primary schools in South Africa. This review highlights the importance of systemic and targeted district support to increase SMT capacity. Although district officials demonstrated commitment, systemic barriers and limited access to resources often hindered their impact. The study recommends empowering SMTs through targeted professional development, better communication channels, and resource-sharing strategies to promote collaborative school improvement. Additionally, the study calls for further research into district-level dynamics within different schooling contexts in South Africa to develop a stronger framework for systemic educational support.

Ultimately, this study advances knowledge in educational leadership and management by providing evidence-based insights into the pivotal role of district offices in supporting primary schools and their SMTs. The findings of this study aim to inform policymakers, district directors, and school leaders on strengthening the synergy between district offices and SMTs, thereby fostering sustainable school effectiveness and academic excellence across diverse school contexts.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A – UNISA Ethical Clearance Certificate



UNISA COLLEGE OF EDUCATION ETHICS REVIEW COMMITTEE

Date: 2024/05/08

Ref: 2024/05/08/60113286/16/AM
Name: Ms SSG Mbokazi
Student No.: 60113286

Dear Ms SSG Mbokazi

**Decision: Ethics Approval from
2024/05/08 to 2027/05/08**

Researcher(s): Name: Ms SSG Mbokazi
E-mail address: 60113286@mylife.unisa.ac.za
Telephone: 0677868346

Supervisor(s): Name: Dr JS Rubbi Numan
E-mail address: rubbijs@unisa.ac.za
Telephone: 012 444 8891

Title of research:

Exploring the roles and responsibilities of district officials in supporting primary School Management Teams in Johannesburg North District.


Qualification: MEd Education Management

Thank you for the application for research ethics clearance by the UNISA College of Education Ethics Review Committee for the above mentioned research. Ethics approval is granted for the period 2024/05/08 to 2027/05/08.

The low risk application was reviewed by the Ethics Review Committee on 2024/05/08 in compliance with the UNISA Policy on Research Ethics and the Standard Operating Procedure on Research Ethics Risk Assessment.

The proposed research may now commence with the provisions that:

1. The researcher will ensure that the research project adheres to the relevant guidelines set out in the Unisa Covid-19 position statement on research ethics attached.
2. The researcher(s) will ensure that the research project adheres to the values and principles expressed in the UNISA Policy on Research Ethics.



University of South Africa
Pretoria Street, Muckleneuk Ridge, City of Tshwane
PO Box 380 UNISA 0003 South Africa
Telephone: +27 12 429 3111 Facsimile: +27 12 429 4130
www.unisa.ac.za

3. Any adverse circumstance arising in the undertaking of the research project that is relevant to the ethicality of the study should be communicated in writing to the UNISA College of Education Ethics Review Committee.
4. The researcher(s) will conduct the study according to the methods and procedures set out in the approved application.
5. Any changes that can affect the study-related risks for the research participants, particularly in terms of assurances made with regards to the protection of participants' privacy and the confidentiality of the data, should be reported to the Committee in writing.
6. The researcher will ensure that the research project adheres to any applicable national legislation, professional codes of conduct, institutional guidelines and scientific standards relevant to the specific field of study. Adherence to the following South African legislation is important, if applicable: Protection of Personal Information Act, no 4 of 2013; Children's act no 38 of 2005 and the National Health Act, no 61 of 2003.
7. Only de-identified research data may be used for secondary research purposes in future on condition that the research objectives are similar to those of the original research. Secondary use of identifiable human research data requires additional ethics clearance.
8. No field work activities may continue after the expiry date 2027/05/08. Submission of a completed research ethics progress report will constitute an application for renewal of Ethics Research Committee approval.

Note:

The reference number 2024/05/08/60113286/16/AM should be clearly indicated on all forms of communication with the intended research participants, as well as with the Committee.

Kind regards,



Prof AT Motlhabane
CHAIRPERSON: CEDU RERC
motlhat@unisa.ac.za



Prof Mpine Makoe
EXECUTIVE DEAN
qakisme@unisa.ac.za

 Approved - decision template – updated 36 Feb 2017

University of South Africa
Pretorius Street, Muckleneuk Ridge, City of Johannesburg
PO Box 392 UNISA 0002 South Africa
Telephone: +27 12 429 3111 Facsimile: +27 12 429 4130
www.unisa.ac.za

Appendix B – Permission/Approval letter from GDE



GAUTENG PROVINCE

Department of Education
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

1. Letter that would indicate that the said researcher/s has/have been granted permission from the Gauteng Department of Education to conduct the research study.
2. The District/Head Office Senior Manager/s must be approached separately, and in writing, for permission to involve District/Head Office Officials in the project.
3. *Because of the relaxation of COVID 19 regulations researchers can collect data online, telephonically, physically access schools or may make arrangements for Zoom with the school Principal. Requests for such arrangements should be submitted to the GDE Education Research and Knowledge Management directorate.*
4. *The Researchers are advised to wear a mask at all times, Social distance at all times, Provide a vaccination certificate or negative COVID-19 test, not older than 72 hours, and Sanitise frequently.*
5. A copy of this letter must be forwarded to the school principal and the chairperson of the School Governing Body (SGB) that would indicate that the researcher/s have been granted permission from the Gauteng Department of Education to conduct the research study.
6. A letter / document that outline the purpose of the research and the anticipated outcomes of such research must be made available to the principals, SGBs and District/Head Office Senior Managers of the schools and districts/offices concerned, respectively.
7. The Researcher will make every effort obtain the goodwill and co-operation of all the GDE officials, principals, and chairpersons of the SGBs, teachers and learners involved. Persons who offer their co-operation will not receive additional remuneration from the Department while those that opt not to participate will not be penalized in any way.
8. Research may only be conducted after school hours so that the normal school programme is not interrupted. The Principal (if at a school) and/or Director (if at a district/head office) must be consulted about an appropriate time when the researcher/s may carry out their research at the sites that they manage.
9. Research may only commence from the second week of February and must be concluded before the beginning of the last quarter of the academic year. If incomplete, an amended Research Approval letter may be requested to conduct research in the following year.
10. Items 6 and 7 will not apply to any research effort being undertaken on behalf of the GDE. Such research will have been commissioned and be paid for by the Gauteng Department of Education.
11. It is the researcher's responsibility to obtain written parental consent of all learners that are expected to participate in the study.
12. The researcher is responsible for supplying and utilising his/her own research resources, such as stationery, photocopies, transport, faxes and telephones and should not depend on the goodwill of the institutions and/or the offices visited for supplying such resources.
13. The names of the GDE officials, schools, principals, parents, teachers and learners that participate in the study may not appear in the research report without the written consent of each of these individuals and/or organisations.
14. On completion of the study the researcher/s must supply the Director: Knowledge Management & Research with one Hard Cover bound and an electronic copy of the research.
15. The researcher may be expected to provide short presentations on the purpose, findings and recommendations of his/her research to both GDE officials and the schools concerned.
16. Should the researcher have been involved with research at a school and/or a district/head office level, the Director concerned must also be supplied with a brief summary of the purpose, findings and recommendations of the research study.

The Gauteng Department of Education wishes you well in this important undertaking and looks forward to examining the findings of your research study.

Kind regards

Dr. G. M. Mukatuni
DCES: Education Research and Knowledge Management

DATE: 18/07/2024

2

Making education a societal priority

Office of the Director: Education Research and Knowledge Management

7th Floor, 17 Simmonds Street, Johannesburg, 2001

Tel: (011) 355 0488

Email: Faeth.Tshabalala@gauteng.gov.za

Website: www.education.gpg.gov.za

Appendix C – Permission/Approval letter from school(s)

23



REQUEST FOR PERMISSION - SCHOOL

20 May 2024

The Principal: _____
_____ Primary School
(Telephone): _____
(Email): _____

Dear _____

Request for permission to conduct research at the School

I, Senzekahle Mbokazi, am undertaking research under the supervision of Dr J.S. Rubbi Numan, a senior lecturer at the Department of Early Childhood Education and Development towards an MEd in Education management at the University of South Africa. We are inviting you to participate in a study entitled:

EXPLORING THE ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF DISTRICT OFFICIALS IN SUPPORTING PRIMARY SCHOOL MANAGEMENT TEAMS IN JOHANNESBURG NORTH DISTRICT

The aim of this study is to determine how district officials support primary school management teams in the Johannesburg North district.

The study will entail 23 participants, of which are 11 district officials, 3 principals, 3 deputy principals and 6 departmental heads. The benefit of this study is envisioned to understand the challenges facing district officials and to establish the strategies district officials may use to address the challenges facing them in supporting primary school management teams in Johannesburg North District. The study will pose no risks to participants or the school. A summary of the research findings will be made available to the principal upon completion of the study.

Yours sincerely



Senzekahle Mbokazi
Researcher

(signature of researcher)
(name of the above signatory)
(signatory's position)

Appendix D - Participant Information Sheet



PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Date: _____

Title: Exploring the Roles and Responsibilities of District Officials in Supporting Primary School Management Teams in Johannesburg North District

DEAR PROSPECTIVE PARTICIPANT

My name is Senzekahle Mbokazi and I am doing research under the supervision of Dr. J.S Rubbi Nunan, a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Early Childhood Education towards a Masters in Education (MEd) at the University of South Africa.

We are inviting you to participate in a study entitled - Exploring the roles and responsibilities of district officials in supporting primary school management teams in Johannesburg North District.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY?

This study is expected to collect important information that could be utilised to develop programmes to support district officials and school managers to work collaboratively toward school effectiveness.

WHY AM I BEING INVITED TO PARTICIPATE?

You are invited because your school management team has been observed as being well-suited for this study as it is an information-rich population, which will allow for productive data collection.

I obtained your contact details from an enquiry made with a member of your school management team, after seeking approval to conduct research.

The approximate number of total participants in this study will be 23. Indicate the approximate number of participants

WHAT IS THE NATURE OF MY PARTICIPATION IN THIS STUDY?

The participant in this study is expected to share their opinions and perspectives on the questions asked on the topic. This study involves document analysis, questionnaires, individual, semi-structured interviews and focus groups.

The questions to be asked within the duration of the various types of data collection will only pertain to experiences in your managerial role. The focus groups will operate within a 60 - 90 minute span, whereas the face-to-face, individual interviews will not exceed 30 minutes and questionnaires will vary in length according to participants, however will be no longer than 30 minutes.

CAN I WITHDRAW FROM THIS STUDY EVEN AFTER HAVING AGREED TO PARTICIPATE?

Participating in this study is voluntary and you are under no obligation to consent to participation. If you do decide to take part, you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a written consent (adult)/ assent (participant younger than 18 years old) form. You are free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason.

WHAT ARE THE POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?

This study is expected to collect important information that could be utilised to develop programmes to support district officials and school managers to work collaboratively toward school effectiveness.

These potential programmes will be exercised to address future occurrences and environmental conditions that may pose obstacles to their occupational lives and well-being.

ARE THERE ANY NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES FOR ME IF I PARTICIPATE IN THE RESEARCH PROJECT?

As this study is a low-risk study, the researcher does not foresee any risks to the health or well-being of the participants. However, in the unlikely case that any issue should arise, the Gauteng Department of Education's (GDE's) Wellness unit is available to assist the

participants in addressing the matter effectively. The contact details of the unit will be readily shared.

WILL THE INFORMATION THAT I CONVEY TO THE RESEARCHER AND MY IDENTITY BE KEPT CONFIDENTIAL?

You have the right to insist that your name will not be recorded anywhere and that no one, apart from the researcher and identified members of the research team, will know about your involvement in this research. The identity of all participants will remain anonymous, in other words, will be kept private and any other personal information will remain confidential to protect participants from any exposure or harm. Your answers will be given a code number or a pseudonym and you will be referred to in this way in the data, any publications, or other research reporting methods such as conference proceedings, as other personal information will remain confidential to protect all participants. However, information shared anonymously will remain anonymous yet may be made available in a research report or journal article.

Focus groups usually hold up to eight interviewees in a single group. They are interviews in the form of a limited number of semi-structured and open-ended questions. The questions often encourage the views and opinions of the participants to be shared. Participants are encouraged, however, to not share any personal information in the focus group interviews.

HOW WILL THE RESEARCHER(S) PROTECT THE SECURITY OF DATA?

Hard copies of your answers will be stored by the researcher for a period of five years in a locked cupboard/filing cabinet in their home for future research or academic purposes. Electronic information will be stored on a password-protected computer. Future use of the stored data will be subject to further Research Ethics Review and approval if applicable. Information can be destroyed by shredding the hardcopy of the study and running a permanent hardware cleaning of the software to delete the file of the study.

WILL I RECEIVE PAYMENT OR ANY INCENTIVES FOR PARTICIPATING IN THIS STUDY?

Participants in this study will not be remunerated for taking part in this research process.

HAS THE STUDY RECEIVED ETHICS APPROVAL

This study has received written approval from the Research Ethics Review Committee of the _____, Unisa. A copy of the approval letter can be obtained from the researcher if you so wish.

HOW WILL I BE INFORMED OF THE FINDINGS/RESULTS OF THE RESEARCH?

If you would like to be informed of the final research findings, please contact Senzekahle Mbokazi on 0677868346 or 60113286@mylife.unisa.ac.za. The findings are accessible for 2024-2029.

Should you require any further information or want to contact the researcher about any aspect of this study, please contact Senzekahle Mbokazi on 0677868346 or 60113286@mylife.unisa.ac.za.

Should you have concerns about the way in which the research has been conducted, you may contact Dr JS Rubbi Nunan on 0124448891 or rubbijs@unisa.ac.za.

Thank you for taking time to read this information sheet and for participating in this study.

Thank you.

GssMbokazi

Senzekahle Mbokazi

Appendix E – Consent Form

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY

I, _____ (participant name), confirm that the person asking my consent to participate in this research has informed me about the nature, procedure, potential benefits, and anticipated inconvenience of participation.

I have read (or had explained to me) and understood the study as explained in the information sheet.

I have had sufficient opportunity to ask questions and am prepared to participate in the study.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without penalty (if applicable).

I am aware that the findings of this study will be processed into a research report, journal publications and/or conference proceedings, but that my participation will be kept confidential unless otherwise specified.

I agree to the recording of the _____ (insert specific data collection method).

I have received a signed copy of the informed consent agreement.

Participant Name & Surname (please print) _____

Participant Signature _____ Date _____

Researcher's Name & Surname (please print) Senzekahle Mbokazi



Researcher's signature

17/04/2024

Date

Appendix F - Interview Schedule(s)

Focus Group Interview Schedule

Focus group interviews will be conducted with the SMTs at the 3 schools.

1. Describe your role in the SMT and how long you have served as a member.
2. How would you describe the impact that the district office has in supporting the SMT?
3. What would you say is lacking on the part of district officials regarding supporting the SMT?
4. In your experience, what would you say are the strengths of district officials?
5. During the year, when would you say you depend most on district officials? Expand on the situations/lived experiences.
6. In which ways do you feel you can rely on district officials to assist or guide management processes at the school?
7. If you were to be placed as a district official, what is an example of change that you would try to implement regarding supporting the SMT?
8. Illustrate your view of the relations between your SMT and district officials and other SMTs and their district officials.
9. Share specific instances in which you felt let down by a district official(s).
10. Do you feel that experience in schools (teaching and managing) plays an important role in being an effective district official? If so, please elaborate.
11. What suggestions would you like to share with district officials to improve engagement and productivity?
12. In your observation what practices would you say the school would benefit from district implementation?

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

The individual face-to-face interviews will be conducted with the Institutional Development and Support Officer and Circuit Manager cohort of the district officials.

1. In your opinion, what do you like about working as a district official?
2. In which ways do you think the working conditions of district officials could be improved?
3. Do you feel supported in your role? If so, how and by which entities?
4. Which areas do you feel have room to improve at the district level?
5. What are some of the challenges/barriers you face in achieving aspects within your role?
6. What could be done by the Head Office to improve the daily work experience of district officials?
7. How would you describe the nature of your relations with your SMTs?
8. How does the reality differ from the ideal relations?
9. How would you describe your relations with the provincial office?
10. What would you say is the general sentiment of officials working at the district office regarding support from the provincial office?
11. What are the misconceptions about your role as IDSO/CM that those you manage may have?
12. How do you manage and dissolve conflict within schools, what intervention strategies do you exercise?

Appendix G - Questionnaire

QUESTIONNAIRE

The following questionnaire will be administered to the subject advisor cohort of District officials.

1. I feel recognized as a valuable member of the team.
a. strongly agree b. agree c. disagree d. strongly disagree

Give a reason for your choice

2. My manager gives constructive and valuable feedback.
a. strongly agree b. agree c. disagree d. strongly disagree

3. I am provided the necessary resources to complete my day-to-day functions.
a. strongly agree b. agree c. disagree d. strongly disagree

Give a reason for your choice

4. Support is easily accessible.
a. strongly agree b. agree c. disagree d. strongly disagree

Give a reason for your choice

5. Opportunities for career growth are available and accessible.
a. strongly agree b. agree c. disagree d. strongly disagree

Give a reason for your choice

6. I have chances to work with a peer or in a group to reach the goal.
a. strongly agree b. agree c. disagree d. strongly disagree
8. My human relations with your direct coworkers are healthy and well-balanced.
a. strongly agree b. agree c. disagree d. strongly disagree

Give a reason for your choice

9. I feel satisfied with my remuneration-to-effort ratio.
a. strongly agree b. agree c. disagree d. strongly disagree

Give a reason for your choice

10. I feel overworked and under-resourced to carry out your duties.
a. strongly agree b. agree c. disagree d. strongly disagree

Give a reason for your choice

11. What are your roles and responsibilities as a district official?

Appendix H – Turnitin Originality Report

Similarity Report

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Summary

Appendix I – Language Editing Certificate



Appendix J – Technical Editing/Formatting Certificate

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TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

I, Sharon Baxter, hereby confirm that I have done the technical editing for the dissertation titled: **EXPLORING THE ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF DISTRICT OFFICIALS IN SUPPORTING PRIMARY SCHOOL MANAGEMENT TEAMS IN JOHANNESBURG NORTH DISTRICT** by **SENZEKAHLE SINOTHANDO GCINA MBOKAZI**, Student number 60113286, submitted in accordance with the requirements for the degree of **MASTER OF EDUCATION**, at the University of South Africa.

Handwritten signature of Sharon Baxter in black ink.

Sharon Baxter

Email: (H) nbaxter@lantic.net

Cell: 0722502075