

## Enhancing the Support System by the Department of Education to Teachers in Rural Setting of South Africa

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### ABSTRACT

This study examines the support system offered by the Department of Education in South African schools in the Free State Province of South Africa. Participants were a purposive sample of eight (8) teachers in rural setting of South Africa (female = 80%, 26 to 55 years old). Data on the support system by the Department of Education to support teachers were collected by means of semi-structured individual interviews. The data were thematically analysed by means of open coding. The study indicated that it is thought that improving the overall effectiveness of the educational system requires increasing the quality of teacher performance through teacher development programs. The study further indicated that viewed support in terms of teacher development especially on issues of instructional leadership or leadership in a general sense, curriculum delivery, while others viewed support in terms of resource provision. When it comes to resource provision, they expected to be provided with materials that would help them to execute their duties successfully. The study indicated that the support that is to be provided by the District Support Team has to be informed by teacher's needs, meaning there must be a collaboration between the two stakeholders whereby they sit and plan together on issues that are of great concern regarding the context of the school.

### KEYWORDS

Teachers; department of education; support; leadership; resources.

## INTRODUCTION

Department of Basic Education at the national level and Provincial Departments of Education at a provincial level are not at the best position to provide the necessary support to schools as they are not acquainted with the challenges faced by the schools at the local level which leaves the district and the circuit offices as the last resort in providing the necessary support to schools.

Schools operate in a complex system that is made up of parts that are dependent on each other and failure to recognise such complexity is one of the reasons why education reforms are failing (Leithwood & Poplin, 1992). Not far from the footsteps of schools lies a partner that is equally responsible for the success or failure of these reforms. The consensus building within research is that the action taken by the education district is of paramount importance in ensuring that educational reforms reach the classroom (Burch & Spillane, 2005). Above all, is the question of how such reforms reach the classroom?

Smith (2011) in his study assembled a mountain of evidence that demonstrated education school districts act as an important catalyst of change that takes place in schools. As a starting point, education districts heavily influence schools' strategic decisions on how to improve teaching and learning. The interest into the role of the district office when it comes to educational change is not something new (Anderson, 2003). The resurgence into the inquiry about the role of the education district in recent years is based on the interpretation of educational policies that are introduced and implemented in a changing environment (Anderson, 2003). This observation by Anderson is well founded owing to the fact that each new generation is faced with problems unique to their own, which in turn requires a new way of thinking and doing things.

Schools on their own cannot achieve such a formidable task of implementing the ever-changing educational reforms on their own which in turn gave way to the realisation that the district office influence is unavoidable if not desirable (Anderson, 2003). To validate the preceding statement Smith (2011) and Leon (2008) both point to the fact that schools on their own cannot change themselves and that the district plays an important function in creating an uninterrupted atmosphere for long term improvement.

During the past decade, research on educational change has shown growing interest in district offices and their functions (Smith, 2013). School districts or district offices as they are known today were not considered to be a major role player that would drive school reforms in the past. Such a thought prompted researchers such as (Ngwenya, 2017; Narsee, 2006; Robertson, 2001; Smith, 2011) to have regarded the district office as one overlooked layer of the education structure in the past. Within the educational structures, it became clear that the district office has unlimited potential to be a vehicle for medium to large-scale educational reform (Roberts, 2001). As a starting point, one of the predominant roles with regard to the district office is to ensure that schools that are under their administration are providing quality teaching and learning, because of this it should not come as a surprise when the district office

identifies ways in which schools and learners' performance can be improved when the standard of performance is not being met (Roberts, 2001)

Education districts that are regarded as supportive are those ones that set expectations, support schools in reaching the set expectations and serve as agents of change by providing a conducive environment in order for the improvement to occur (Bergeson, 2004). Raising a similar view in affirming the importance of the district support (Waters and Marzano, 2006) indicated that well founded education districts ensure that collaborative goals are set with schools towards which all stakeholders work and allocate the necessary resources so that these goals can be achieved. For instance, in United States, school districts translate, interpret, support, or block actions on behalf of their schools that are related to federal and state policy (Massell, 2000).

Reporting on how the district office support schools in the USA, Massell (2000) studied the data that was collected from 22 districts of 8 states which included California, Colorado, Florida, Kentucky Maryland, Michigan, Minnesota, and Texas over a two-year period by the Consortium for Policy Research in Education (CPRE). Four strategies according to Massell (2000) that kept on showing up across the 8 states that were used by the district office in building the capacity of schools as part of a support mechanism were as follows:

#### **Interpreting and using data**

Out of all the 8 states that were featured for the study, research had shown that the 22 districts used and interpreted the data jointly with schools in order to develop activities for the professional development of teachers, to single out performance gaps, to align curriculum and instruction and finally to identify learners who are in need of remedial/gifted programs. Before then, education districts had required the reporting of data as form of accountability mechanism but had since taken an active role by focusing more attention on the data and helping schools to use that data meaningfully. Education districts even employed data experts both in their central offices and schools (Massell, 2000).

For instance, the Maryland district employed data analyses experts who analysed data on behalf of schools. After completing analysing the data on behalf of schools, a meeting of the school staff comprising of four to five members would be scheduled to review test results item by item, examining the number of students scoring at the different levels of proficiency in each subject area. They would also talk about how far they had come over time, what it means for learners to achieve at different levels, and what the results meant. The district also worked with the individual schools and produced data profiles for them (Massell, 2000).

When discussions about school improvement are driven by performance data, teachers and district officials advocate for more and better data on student achievement (Carvalho et al., 2022; Jakubowski, 2022). This led to education districts and schools developing and administering more assessments. These exams were intended to track students' progress toward district and/or state goals and to give instructors and schools with instructional

feedback. In certain cases, education districts had required the data of learners for special programs identification (Massell, 2000).

### **Building teacher knowledge and skills**

Almost all of the districts studied saw the development of teachers' knowledge and abilities as a stabilising component of change. Professional training was supported in some way by each education district, either in the form of workshops or providing resources to schools so that teachers can pursue their professional development on their own. Although methods used by education districts to improve teachers' knowledge and abilities varied throughout time, incentives and support, what was clear across the 22 districts was a less reliance on the traditional form of professional learning (Massell, 2000).

Workshops as form of a traditional method of strengthening teacher's knowledge and skills were criticised for lacking a sustained follow up support which fails to identify if new skills and ideas that were learnt from the workshops were applied in the classroom. To solve this issue, education districts started following non-traditional forms of professional learning such as school networks, peer mentoring and school-based support which became the most preferred alternative. The reason for choosing school-based support is because it allowed a follow up and provided on going opportunities for professional learning (Massell, 2000).

A majority of the education districts had appointed persons who were tasked with providing continuous on-site assistance to schools. For instance, the Kentucky district hired four resource teachers who had to model a lesson, direct teachers to more information on new instructional practices and assist them in implementing new instructional strategies. The Minnesota education district hired a teacher facilitator on a special assignment in each school to staff in implementing the state's graduation requirements. To help teachers interpret student achievement and other statistics collected by the state accountability system, each school in a Texas district was assigned an instruction guide for professional development in reading and mathematics (Massell, 2000).

In addition to the above, the education districts recruited teachers to create a home-grown instructional policies and tools. If this was not enough education district allowed the development of performance-based assessment, scoring rubrics, curriculum, and standards by teachers (Amsterdam & Nkambule, 2018). Teachers from a Colorado education district ran a summer institute that focused on building curriculum modules aligned with local standards (Shanks, 2017). These projects were viewed not simply as ways to improve teachers' knowledge and abilities, but also as a way for districts to increase their own ability to meet significant policy objectives (Massell, 2000).

### **Aligning curriculum and instruction**

In relation into improving teachers' knowledge and skills, improving curriculum and instruction was also seen as a critical component of capacity building by the education districts studied. The current climate of accountability and standards-based reform is forcing school districts to align instructional practices vertically with state policies and horizontally with other district and

school practices. The 22 districts varied on how they went about in aligning their curriculum and instruction to state policies and other elements of the district and school practices. Other districts followed an embedded approach, for instance other district developed documents that explicitly explained how the curriculum should be followed while others used a less structured approach through developmental activities (Massell, 2000).

In taking a less structured approach, the literacy and mathematics workshops in the Learning Community District were based on the subject matter itself and the philosophy of the education district instead of being bound to a textbook or “curriculum package”. For the purposes of real change, one Maryland district created a simplified set of state standards and outcomes to give its schools flexibility, it believed was essential. In some instances, performance assessments were utilised by some districts to align teaching methods and curriculum with new goals. The performance-based instruction model assisted in planning new teaching strategies. In Kentucky, for instance, schools had complete authority over curriculum, instruction and schools often used different instructional materials (Massell, 2000).

In certain cases, the approach that was followed by the education district was informed by the learning area itself. For instance, one Michigan district had no centrally adopted textbook for a learning area called “language art” and teachers were allowed to choose any book of their choice while the same education district decided to adopt a textbook series in elementary mathematics because it saw a need for greater uniformity and continuity in that learning area (Massell, 2000).

### **Targeting interventions on low-performing students/schools.**

Another technique adopted by education districts to increase the capacity was to focus greater resources and attention to underperforming schools and its learners. In providing support for school improvement, schools were helped to interpret and use performance data in planning. A handful of education districts made more personnel and resources available to low-performing schools. In some cases, special offices, teams, or units were established to provide assistance. Teachers, principals, and other staff from high achieving schools worked with schools in need of support in one California district. Some low performing schools were required or encouraged to network with more successful schools as a way to stimulate fresh thinking about how to improve performance. This phenomenon is known as twinning of schools in South Africa. In a last-ditch effort, several districts gave financial incentives to low performing schools to adopt specific curriculum and instructional programs, as well as entire school reforms. (Massell, 2000).

Across all districts studied, special assistance was provided to students who had not met local or state performance standards. Reading Recovery was an intense tutoring program that offered alternate reading skills for struggling young readers in some education districts (Massell 2000).

Arguing from the United Kingdom point of view, Harris (2002) argues that powerful ideas typically motivate the desire for change in education, yet inadequate attention has been made

into establishing conditions that would allow capacity building within schools. The goal of capacity building is to create conditions, opportunities, and experiences that encourage collaboration and reciprocal learning. In taking a different approach Harris (2002) commends the Improving the Quality of Education for All' (IQEA) project as one of the most successful school improvement projects in the UK. The project understood that innovative work will soon become marginalised if appropriate attention is not paid to the school's development capacity or internal conditions (Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2008). The IQEA project was a joint venture between Local Education Authorities together with the University of Cambridge.

The project focused on the teaching and learning process as well as the conditions in classrooms and schools that foster and maintain school progress and at the same time recognised teacher collaboration (Harris, 2002). The IQEA project acknowledged that schools as organisations have a tendency to minimise teachers acting in a collegial, cooperative manner. Therefore, internal and external change agents give much needed pressure and support in order to achieve the structural and cultural changes required for teacher cooperation to occur (Harris, 2002). The creation of a school improvement group (SIG) within IQEA is a key driver for change within the organisation while the external change agents were provided by the district. With the help of district advisors that were appointed, the district was able to ensure that schools are internally capacitated by ensuring that the support they received meet their internal needs, were able to maintain the momentum of the school development and were able link school development to local and national priorities (Leithwood *et al*,2008). In providing support within the context of the school, the subject advisor focused on improvement efforts that will make a difference in their context and aligning the IQEA Project to the emerging needs of the school (Harris, 2002).

Before 2011 when district offices in South Africa were to be considered for a policy status, the burning question around that time was where can education reform be driven from (HRDC, 2014). Such an absence of policy regarding district offices was even questioned by Narsee (2006) in one her studies called "The common and contested meaning of districts in South Africa". One of the attempts that was made by the Ministry of Education was to give a delegated responsibility to school management and governance structures through the introduction of the South African Schools Act of 1996 with the hope that education reforms could be driven from schools (HRDC, 2014). In subsequent years, it became evident from the standpoint of educational policy that schools could not continue the "reform agenda" on their own without external assistance (HRDC, 2014).

In South Africa, the attention to the role of the district office as a catalyst of change started gaining momentum after 1994. This was after reform programmes such as school effectiveness, school development and school improvement that were introduced by both the government and NGOs in their individual capacity failed to live up to the expected outcomes (Chinsamy, 2013: 185). Roberts (2001) correctly observed that reforms that are of a small scale in nature are often unsustainable in the long term due to constraints related to funding and in

most cases such programmes are only afforded to a limited number of schools. Fleisch (2002) reminds us that while important work was done by NGOs in school-by-school initiatives, the isolated interventions hardly led to a system wide change and more importantly, they hardly translated into a sustained improvement. Roberts (2001) has compared the results of such programs to "small spots of light" that boost a particular school but have no "impact on the education system as a whole". To drive reforms from a system wide approach, the district office still had to be capacitated especially since the country was now founded on principles of democracy. Fleisch (2002) summarises some of the projects that focused on the district offices as follows:

**SEED: Learning Organisation Model**

This early organisational development project in the Western Cape focused on organisational culture change. It stressed the importance of democratic values within the department through developing interdisciplinary teams drawn from various layers within the organisation (Fleisch, 2002).

**DDSP: Building Strong Partnerships and Using Data**

This pioneer multi-level project, working in four provinces, has been effective in building provincial office and district level collaboration using a variety of structural and staffing approaches. In one site the project also developed an indicator database that is proving to be effective in project and school management (Fleisch, 2002).

**QLP: Systemic Theory**

The largest of the multi-level initiatives working in all nine provinces developed its intervention model on the basis of a systemic theory of change. It built the change initiative around clear and achievable targets that were used to integrate the various programme components and levels (Fleisch, 2002).

**DIP: Teacher Development**

The Benoni/Brakpan District DIP was initiated and implemented by a district office. The project itself emerged out of problems encountered with policy implementation. To overcome problems of capacity it creatively drew on expertise both in schools and from external service providers (Fleisch, 2002).

**SQIP: School Audits**

A small- scale, relatively low-cost project was designed to focus on improving district offices. The project successfully pioneered the training, mentoring and support of superintendents in the complex process of school audits (Fleisch, 2002).

**Delta Foundation: Eastern Cape Model**

The Delta Foundation provided support to the Eastern Cape Department of Education to analyse and develop a new approach to the structure and staffing of district offices (Fleisch, 2002).

**SSDP: Backward Mapping**

The Soshanguve School Development Project led the way in developing a bottom-up approach to district development. Building district activities around school needs, this project developed

a method for ensuring that districts respond to clients' requirements through interdisciplinary teams (Fleisch, 2002).

Although district offices are regarded as support centres of schools within the South African education system, literature has shown otherwise. District offices are seen as favouring matters concerning policy compliance rather than supporting schools in activities that have a direct impact in the classroom during their visits to schools (Mavuso, 2013; Narsee, 2006). As a result, schools are not receiving district assistance in response to their own challenges and requirements. District offices are often seen as "passive intermediaries between schools and the provincial office, as go-betweens, channels of communication, and as policy transmitters and post boxes" (Narsee, 2006). These metaphors cast district offices in a passive role which is a role that various stakeholders according to Narsee (2006) are not satisfied about. They suggest that instead of simply passing information to schools or acting as facilitators, districts should actively support and guide them (Narsee, 2006).

### **District Support Team visit to schools (Dstv)**

District support by district officials through school visits is a world-wide practice (Mavuso & Moyo, 2014). As stated by the Free State Department of Education (FSDoe, 2016, 2) such visits would aid in collecting critical information about the school and informing departmental officials about school realities and factors that impede learning and preparation. While conducting their visit, the District Support Team should make it clear to the School Management Team and teachers that they are there to support and guide them (FSDoe, 2016). Although this might be the case, it is alleged that in some areas, teachers backed by their unions do not allow such visits to take place. Perhaps what the district office sees as "support" is not viewed the same by teachers.

### **Teachers' conceptualisation of support**

Almost all of the districts studied saw the development of teachers' knowledge and abilities as a stabilising component of change. Professional training was supported in some way by each education district, either in the form of workshops or providing resources to schools so that teachers can pursue their professional development on their own (Massell, 2000).

The district offices in South Africa are mandated by the Department of Basic Education through its Policy on The Organisation, Roles and Responsibilities of Education Districts to support schools under their jurisdiction (Van der Voort & Wood, 2016). This support is a vital ingredient in the work of education systems across the world (Amsterdam & Nkambule, 2018). Although the district offices have been mandated by the Department of Basic Education at a national level and provincial level to perform the supporting role as one of their main functions to schools, many schools are still underperforming, meaning learners are not achieving the required learning outcomes (Van der Voort & Wood, 2016).

It is of interest is to identify key factors that may contribute or are contributing to the dismal performance of learners; this would, in turn, inform the kind of a support that must be provided. Researchers such as Amsterdam and Nkambule (2018) attribute the low level of



learner performance to continued reforms of the education system, which schools and teachers cannot find their way around on their own. Van der Voort and Wood (2016) point a finger at the “general state of dysfunctionality that many schools find themselves in as a result of poor management and leadership”. Further, Van der Voort and Wood (2016) warn that dysfunctional schools will stay dysfunctional unless they receive the necessary help from the persons engaged by the system to give such help

### **METHODOLOGY**

The study utilized a phenomenological qualitative inquiry (Ary et al., 2009) to get an in-depth understanding support system by the Department of Education to Teachers in rural setting of South Africa. The phenomenological approach is appropriate to support teachers. Through interviews, a qualitative research methodology allowed the researcher to hear from participants and examine hidden factors that shape their actions and behavior (Cohen et al., 2018). By using a qualitative research methodology, the researcher was able to examine and describe a phenomenon from the participants' lived experiences (Smit, 2010). The researcher was able to comprehend the participants' interactions with the District Support Team and the significance they assigned to those interactions by employing a qualitative study methodology.

#### **Participants and setting**

Participants where a convenience sample were a purposive sample of eight (8) teachers in rural setting of South Africa (female = 80%, 26 to 55 years old) in the Free State Province of South Africa. The participants were mainly black, and some of them are from rural communities in South Africa and speak Setswana, Sesotho, Afrikaans and Xhosa as the mother tongue and the majority of the students are Christians.

#### **Data collection and Procedure**

The participating teachers completed a *semi-structured individual interview* to get an in-depth understanding of support system by the Department of Education in the Free State Province of South Africa. Participants consented to the study in writing. Data was collected by the researcher at different school in the Free State of South Africa. To ensure transferability, the researcher provided enough description of the characteristics of the participants, the topic of the study and its objectives, and the data collection process in order to enable the reader to decide if the findings can be transferred to other similar situations (Morrow, 2005) and allow them to make comparisons.

#### **Data analysis**

Data was thematically analysed using open- coding procedures (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2010). These involved systematically organizing, categorizing and summarizing data and describing it in meaningful themes. Themes were assigned codes in an attempt to condense the data into categories. Creswell (2013) model of data was employed by the researcher because of its accuracy in academic research. Data collected was recorded, arranged, typed and was in one

document and saved. Analysis of the finding was done once this was done and then trends and patterns was identified and interpreted in order to develop themes.

### FINDINGS and DISCUSSION

The findings from the data generated through semi-structured interviews showed that participants had different views on what they consider to be support. Their responses varied based on their individual demands. What was clear is that no matter which way they viewed support, they believed the kind of support they would receive had the potential to change how they did things before. Others viewed support in terms of teacher development especially on issues of instructional leadership or leadership in a general sense, curriculum delivery, while others viewed support in terms of resource provision.

#### Teacher development

Under this theme Teacher 1, 4 and 5 were very clear on what they expected to be developed on when they interacted with the District Support Team. They expected to be developed in matters relating to curriculum, curriculum delivery, assessment, monitoring and control.

**Teacher 1** had the following view:

*“We expect that when these people come, they will develop, help and give you a different perspective on how you should go about approaching the content”* (Teacher 1 from School A teaching mathematics)

What Teacher 1 is really referring to is curriculum delivery. This in line with the argument of Gama (2015: 38) that the teacher should be equipped with particular skills in order for teaching and learning to take place effectively (Gama, 2015: 38). The teacher is at the centre of implementing the curriculum well, and they need specialised abilities and subject-matter expertise to do so (Gama, 2015).

Teacher 1 went further by saying:

*“if someone is coming to support you. Someone is going to show you what you have done wrong and how you go about rectifying that and becoming better”.*

While Teacher 4 had this to say:

*“Support is the help or assistant offered by someone to develop or improve your ability to do things in a better way”.* (Teacher 4 from school B teaching languages)

Although Teacher 5 was not clear on what she expected to be developed at, she had this to say and she had a lot to say:

*“Support ke e utlwisisa ka development (I understand support in terms of development). Ha motho a tla mona, tlameha a tle a tlo ndevelop as a teacher or as an HOD (If someone comes here, that person must come here and develop me as a teacher and HoD). Ha satlo n di moralise (That person must not come here and demoralise me). Support ke ho develop hore next time o improve from level 1 to 2, from 2 to 3 (Support is to develop a person so that next time one improves from level 1 to 2, level 3 to 4).”* (Teacher 5 from school C teaching commercial subjects)

To close it off SMT 2 was brief and straight to the point by saying:

*“Ke nahana support ke ho leka hore enable hore re tsebe ho deliver di function tsa rona hantle (I think support is when they try to enable us to perform our functions better).” (SMT 2 from school C teaching mathematics)*

Subramoney (2016) states that SMTs must fulfill two responsibilities: being both a player in a team of managers, and also a leader in monitoring academic performance and promoting improvement of results.

From the sentiments of Teacher 5 above it is clear she is not happy about how she was supported. What is clear from Teacher 1, 4, 5 and SMT 2 is that there should be an improvement after the interaction. This notion is supported by Darling-Hammond, Hyler, Gardner (2017), when they say effective professional development results in changes in teacher practices. They further argue that the focus of professional development should be on the subject matter that teachers teach (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017).

### **Leadership**

SMT 1 based on his role at the school understood support in terms of leadership, governance and management. He had this to say:

*“Is to give leadership and guidance, in terms of governance and management.” (SMT 1 from School A with no class)*

It has been noticed that the performance or non-performance of schools is at times commonly associated with the leadership that is provided within the school, by the principal jointly with the other members of his/her school management team (Mthembu, 2014). School leadership, according to Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins (2008), is only second to classroom teaching in terms of influence on learner learning. From a district point of view, the leadership is provided by the Circuit Manager. Similar to Subject Advisors, Circuit Managers work directly with schools, providing support to school management and governing bodies. (2013). The circuit manager's primary responsibility is to assist school principals, school management teams (SMTs), and school governing bodies with school management, administration, and governance of schools (Bantwini & Morosi 2018; Ngwenya, 2017).

### **Resource provision**

Teacher 6 understood support in terms of resource provision as she believed that resources were vital to her in carrying her duties. She had this to say:

*“Mm support ke e understand if there are any resources tseo ke senang tsona jwalo ka titjhere wa Hod. Dstv e tlameha ho mprovide. resources are my tools (My understanding of support is that the Dstv must provide me with certain resources or tools that I do not have).” (Teacher 6 from school C teaching languages)*

Teaching and learning resources should be made available throughout lesson delivery in order to increase students' performance (Mukhethoni, 2019). Resources for teaching and learning include a variety of items that include course material and aid in knowledge acquisition (Mohono, 2010). As part of teacher development, district officials should provide curriculum materials including sample assessments and student work samples (Darling-Hammond et al.,

2017). In relation to literature, Mavuso (2013) defines support as a planned and coordinated effort by district officials to assist teachers with planning teaching and learning activities, and as well as assessing learning activities which is consistent with what the participants have described above

### CONCLUSION and RECOMMENDATIONS

This objective of the study was to find out from the participants' point of view how they understood support given the fact that when the District Support Team comes to visit them, they usually say they are going to support teachers. From the various responses that the participants provided, the following themes were identified: teacher development, while others viewed support in terms of leadership in general in areas of governance and management especially participants who were members of the SMT and also by providing resources. In terms of development participants expected to be developed in matters relating to the curriculum matters be it curriculum delivery, assessment, monitoring and control. When it comes to resource provisioning, participants expected to be provided with the resources that they lacked. The support that is to be provided by the District Support Team has to be informed by teacher's needs, meaning there must be collaboration between the two stakeholders whereby they sit and plan together on issues that are of great concern regarding the context of the school. Such a collaboration will pave way in ensuring the support that is provided by the District Support Team is line with what teachers expected. Given the fact that the Free State Department of Education has developed protocol and procedures on the school visit by education official that should be the starting point of collaboration between teachers and the District Support Team

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