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Perceptions of principals and district officials regarding how the school district supports principals' instructional leadership

Abstract

The 21st century places significant demands on our educational system. It is an opportune time to re-imagine the mission, operations, and skills expected of school district offices. The focus of this study was on the school district's role in strengthening principals' instructional leadership capacity for improving educational outcomes. Using a case study design, interviews were conducted with 10 principals and 14 district officials in one school district. The findings showed that district officials placed instructional leadership at the core of their role in their interactions with principals. They continued to monitor curriculum delivery and provided reports but also assumed a mentoring approach in working with principals. The study further highlighted that principals did not always implement recommendations to improve instruction at schools as they felt overwhelmed by work demands. Principals expressed the need for professional development tailored to their instructional leadership roles and on-site workshops. The findings indicate that there is a need for greater communication between principals and district officials where principals can openly deliberate issues related to instructional leadership confronting their schools with a view to problem solving. Moreover, district officials could enable the sharing of best instructional practices among schools.

Keywords: *district official, education district, instructional leadership, organisational learning, principal, professional development, school district*

1. Introduction and background to the problem

The role that education districts play is vital to an education system's long-term sustainability (Human Resource Development Council of South Africa [HRDC], 2014). Education districts of the 21st century are moving beyond their traditional role of enforcing compliance (Narsee, 2006) and "exclusive monitoring" (De Clercq & Shalem, 2014: 3). A key area of focus for education districts is to improve learner academic achievement by developing school leadership capacity so that school leaders and



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managers have “the knowledge, skills and dispositions” to lead schools, especially “low-performing schools” (Orr, King & LaPointe, 2010: 2). Powell (2017) contends that strategies to improve learner achievement are more sustainable when district officials assume instructional leadership roles rather than bureaucratic roles. Thus, education districts need to play a pivotal role in developing and supporting principals in their instructional leadership role. Instructional leadership is a collection of behaviours and practices implemented by principals to foster teachers’ instructional development, and these activities are closely linked to student achievement (Hallinger, 2011). According to the Policy on the Organisation, Roles, and Responsibilities of Education Districts, districts should promote a positive school climate for teaching and learning and visit schools to observe classrooms, consult, hold cluster meetings and report on these aspects (Department of Basic Education [DBE], 2013). The policy illuminates the role of the district as the basis of education delivery, earmarking the education district as an important agent of instructional leadership.

Numerous difficulties have plagued the principal’s instructional leadership role in South Africa. First, preparation programmes to assume principalship are not a mandatory requirement. Second, principals have not grasped their instructional roles and how these should be executed (Chabalala & Naidoo, 2021). Third, if principals lack an understanding of, or ignore their instructional leadership function, schools are unlikely to function effectively in terms of teaching and learning (van Wyk, 2020). The performance and accountability for learner outcomes expected from school principals must be viewed in the context of how the district office works with principals and assists them. The education district is the foremost support system of school leadership (Fleisch, 2024). When district-level instructional leadership is supportive and efficient, instructional leadership at the school level will benefit (Chuta, 2019). Greater collaboration between district officials and principals is warranted (Moorosi & Bantwini, 2016: 6). We argue that the school district should prioritise instructional leadership which can be achieved by providing professional development, resources, curriculum, and assessment implementation methods (DBE, 2016: 19). To this end, principals must have a clear awareness of their instructional leadership function and how to access direction and assistance from the school district for their instructional leadership needs.

Against this background, the study aimed to examine the perceptions of principals and district officials regarding how the school district supports principals’ instructional leadership. The research questions are:

- How do district officials understand their IL role?
- What are the challenges that hinder effective IL at schools?
- How do district officials support principals’ instructional leadership.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The principal’s instructional leadership role

Instructional leadership is broadly understood as the principal’s overall management of curriculum and instruction. For instance, Southworth (2009: 93) describes instructional leadership as learning-centred leadership, but scholars have also underpinned particularities associated with the concept. Seminal scholar Weber (1987: 39) conceptualised instructional leadership as leading five activities including goal setting, managing the instructional programme, facilitating a “learning environment,” creating “a friendly and cooperative school

environment” and reviewing the curriculum. Hallinger (2005), identified three dimensions of instructional leadership where principals could influence teaching and learning. These dimensions were “defining the school mission”, “managing the instructional programme” and “promoting a positive school learning climate” (Hallinger, 2005: 5). Hopkins (2003: 56) associated instructional leadership with “values” and purpose, management of the curriculum and teaching and developing the school into “a professional learning community.” Le Fevre (2021) states that instructional leadership practices should place a strong emphasis on learning, establishing and advancing learning goals, monitoring improvements in learning, protecting instructional time, co-ordinating the curriculum and supporting instruction and teacher professional development. An instructional leadership role requires principals to manage their time well, promote teacher training and growth, foster a sense of morality in the school culture, ensure the use of resources to promote learning and be open to continuous learning (Shava, Heystek & Chasara, 2021). From the various conceptualisations, instructional leadership involves vision towards the achievement of learning outcomes, a curriculum that is well monitored and reviewed, a school culture where conditions for learning are optimal and continuous professional development of teachers towards the vision.

The National Education Evaluation and Development Unit (NEEDU, 2013) report places the principal firmly at the helm of curriculum delivery, with the School Management Team (SMT) involved in the tasks and responsibilities that are formally distributed to them. School-based instructional leadership focuses on teaching and learning activities at the site of the classroom. This type of instructional leadership is led and managed by the principal together with SMT members and other educators officially assigned to a position within the school (Mapetere, 2015).

2.2 The education district’s instructional role

A South African school district’s main goal is to advance a high quality of teaching and learning and provide appropriate assistance to schools (DBE, 2013). The various positions held in a South African education district office are, amongst others, the district director, cluster leaders also known as Institutional Development School Officers [IDSOs], circuit team managers and curriculum specialists. The instructional role is reinforced by the South African Government Gazette which states that districts should “work collaboratively with principals and educators, to provide management and professional support, and to assist schools in achieving excellence in teaching and learning” (DBE, 2013: 21). Mapetere (2015) contends that principals and education district officials should collaborate to improve management and professionalism, including planning, monitoring and responsibility for instructional leadership practices. The policy, *The Organisation, Roles, and Responsibilities of Education Districts* further outlines the districts’ role in establishing an environment conducive to teaching and learning in schools and assisting in curriculum delivery (DBE, 2013). Hence, the role and function of the education district has its primary focus on assisting schools to enable the delivery of high-quality education (DBE, 2013). The role of district officials in general includes communication, management support, training, administrative support, technical and resources provisioning, monitoring and curriculum support (DBE, 2013:26). The responsibilities of a Cluster Leader are specific to providing support to the principal in leading his/her school, managing the day-to-day operations, in fulfilling administrative requirements, and in facilitating curriculum delivery.

2.3 Challenges faced by school districts in promoting instructional leadership

Historically, the role of the district office has been contested and even regarded as the “weak link in the education delivery chain” (DBE, 2021: n.p.). Narsee (2006: 6) questioned whether districts ought to be providing “professional services” or upholding policy compliance. It can be argued that in the present context, both professional knowledge and policy implementation pertaining to instructional leadership are required to improve learner performance. Research by Naicker (2014) pointed to the overly administrative focus of school districts at the expense of developing the instructional role of principals. The DBE (2021: n.p.) further acknowledged that “processing paper” was given more attention than the professional role that district offices ought to play. It was further argued by Bantwini and Diko (2011) that although education district offices in South Africa performed an important function, there was a need for legislation to define their authority and responsibilities. Inadequate legislation was attributed to a disregard for the district level of the education system (Bantwini & Diko, 2011). In 2013, when the Policy on the Organisation, Roles and Responsibilities of Education Districts came into being (DBE, 2013), a mind shift emerged that a district was the core of “education delivery” (DBE, 2021: n.p.). Attempts to establish mechanisms to coordinate and oversee instructional leadership programmes failed (Chuta, 2018). Furthermore, expertise to enhance principals’ instructional leadership in schools was lacking (Chuta, 2018). The National Planning Commission (NPC) further acknowledged that districts may lack the capacity to lead the transformation of the education system (HRDC, 2014). Interconnections between principals and district officials within the district were weak, hindering synergism and in turn, the progress of the school district as a system (Naicker, 2014). Similarly, Moorosi and Bantwini (2016) found that there was a need for greater collaboration between district officials and principals. Orr *et al.* (2010) maintain that district officials in effective districts collaborate and communicate regularly with principals, adopt a common vision, buy into the goals and use feedback loops for organisational improvement.

2.4 Theoretical framework

Organisational learning (OL) theory served as the theoretical basis for this research. Seminal works by Argyris and Schön (1978) refer to OL as the discovery and rectification of errors. Effective learning incorporates three levels of learning to constantly improve the organisation: “single-loop, double-loop and deuterio-learning” (Argyris & Schön, 1996: 28). The first level of learning is single-loop, which “occurs when matches are created, or when mismatches are corrected by changing actions” Argyris (1999: 68). The second level is double-loop which seeks to question and alter the existing paradigm of single-loop learning’s current assumptions and conditions (Worley & Cummings, 2008: 543). Double-loop learning leads to a better understanding of our assertions and enabling informed decisions in identifying the current challenges, to further organisational effectiveness and improvement (Argyris & Schön, 1996: 23). Deutero-loop learning is characterised as “learning to learn” and occurs when an organisation learns how to use “both single-loop and double-loop learning strategies” (Worley & Cummings, 2008: 543). As a result, the organisation can restructure its activities, align results and expectations, and transform organisational culture (Argyris & Schön, 1996: 16). According to Indumathi (2016: 348), “while single-loop learning is appropriate for every

organisation, double-loop and, in particular, deuterio-learning are substantially more challenging to implement." Double-loop is complex involving more than a quick-fix or piecemeal change but a reconceptualisation of the problem at hand. As such, double-loop and deuterio-learning involves a mindset change in the organisation, which is not easily realised.

Factors that impede a district's ability to "track, assess, and respond to schools in a proactive and supportive manner" include the organisation's "structure" and "bureaucratic, compliance-driven working cultures" (McLennan, 2017: 1). Furthermore, OL may be hindered when cluster leaders, curriculum specialists and other officials prefer to work in silos when supporting principals (McLennan, 2017: 1).

The OL theory contributed to a better understanding of how educational districts and schools "learn and adapt" (Argote & Miron-Spektor, 2011: 2) to instructional leadership challenges. OL occurs because of experience and an organisation is said to have learnt from an experience when there is a change in the organisation's behaviour or performance. The district's OL outcomes will be evident when the principal demonstrates improved instructional leadership performance at school. The OL framework assisted to understand how instructional leadership is implemented and how the education district contributes to positive school transformation. Instructional leadership at the district level is critical for improving, enhancing, and implementing teaching and learning practices as well as strengthening principal capability.

3. Methodology

The research paradigm was interpretive, and a qualitative research approach was used to illuminate the perspectives of education district officials regarding their role in supporting principals as instructional leaders. A case study was appropriate for examining the "complex social phenomena, and real-life events" (Yin, 2009: 18) concerning instructional leadership practices and interactions between school and district leaders. The case chosen was one education district in the Gauteng province of South Africa, purposively selected in terms of its accessibility and location for the researchers so that prolonged data collection could ensue. The school district in the study included middle-class and disadvantaged communities in one of the lower-performing districts. Data collection drew on two groups of participants, namely principals and district officials through interviews. Semi-structured, individual interviews were conducted with five primary and five secondary school principals at their school sites. Two focus group interviews were conducted with district officials, one with cluster leaders (the IDSOs) and one with curriculum specialists. Thematic analysis was employed to identify and summarise "message content" (Neuendorf, 2019: 214). Measures of trustworthiness were applied, namely credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985: 290). Credibility was promoted by means of engaging with data collection in the field for a long duration of one year, by using "member checks" and aiming for "triangulation" between the two groups of participants (Korstjens & Moser, 2018: 123). Transferability involved providing details of the "context of the study" as well as a thorough "description of the phenomenon" (Shenton, 2004: 73), which was done when reporting the study. In this way, others can compare the research setting to situations that they recognise and can gauge if the findings are applicable (Shenton, 2004: 63). To render the research dependable, I strove to conduct the inquiry systematically, to provide an audit trail and to document the study accurately (Tobin & Begley, 2004:388). Furthermore, the methodology has been described in detail to enable the repetition of the study (Shenton, 2004:71). Finally, to achieve confirmability, the evidence from the data was strictly adhered to rather than my own views as advised by Shenton (2004: 72).

Ethical clearance was obtained from the university's research ethics committee as well as the relevant education department and school district. Informed consent was obtained from all the study participants. I endeavoured to conduct this "research" in an objective manner and with "integrity" (Mouton, 2001: 240).

4. Findings and discussion

In this section, selected findings from the study are presented and discussed. Four strong themes that share insights into district officials' instructional roles were identified. Codes were used to identify quotations from the participants' interviews. The code CL/I was used to refer to district officials designated as cluster leaders (also known as IDSOs). The codes CES and DCES were used for chief education specialist and deputy chief education specialist respectively.

4.1 Theme 1: District officials' understanding of their instructional leadership role

Assisting principals to facilitate curriculum delivery emerged as a strong finding when district officials described their own instructional leadership duties. The CES of the education district expressed it as follows:

As the CES, in terms of curriculum, my role is to ensure that I support the principal by ensuring that there are systems in curriculum leadership.

We have a forum for principals where we share all the information that will lead to curriculum delivery and I take that responsibility in those meetings.

It could mean that the roles and responsibilities of the CL are clear on policy at national level, but not on practice at the provincial level. It can be inferred that awareness of their roles and responsibilities as CL contrasts with their ability to perform the said roles and responsibilities associated with the position. Hence, it would seem that principals are not adequately supported by the CL.

A CL/Is spoke of their role as not only monitoring but providing support regarding curriculum delivery in schools and ensuring the principal had a plan in place:

It's not only about monitoring; it's more about support because if you pick up all the gaps as far as teaching and learning is concerned the teacher himself must know how he closes this gap...One must ensure that the curriculum is implemented in the school. It is important for them [principals] to know how they go about it and therefore their plan for the year must be in place.

Other CL/Is and curriculum officials supported the need for having effective teaching and learning reporting systems. A CL/I expressed that they expected principals to work through their departmental heads (DHs) by requesting reports from them on curriculum delivery:

What we try and do is to make sure our principals get reports from their heads of department and deputy principals regularly with regard to what is happening with teaching and learning, completion of syllabus, school-based assessment completion...

The research interviews took place just before the term departmental heads (DH) was introduced which replaced that of the heads of departments (HoDs). While teachers are on post level 1, DHs are on post level 2 and are responsible to drive curriculum by supporting teachers.

It emerged that CL/Is held meetings with principals with the goal of improving performance. CL/Is stated:

When we are at schools ... we monitor if the principal is managing the curriculum; we sit down after the results; we analyse the results and then we see that if there are gaps.

Management plans ... meetings are in place as well as reviewing especially the results, analysing the results and coming up with strategies.

Mentoring and coaching were evident in the roles that district officials articulated in their instructional leadership support to principals. A CL/I asserted:

To understand him [the principal] as a person, as a leader in the school and have one-on-one sessions on supporting him in his areas of weakness. Some principals just by character ... they are weak. They are not strong enough to lead, because of the lack of confidence.

Another CL/I remarked:

We also give them guidance how to monitor.... because you find that principals are overwhelmed.

When district curriculum officials saw a need they took it upon themselves to provide induction and training for principals. A DCES remarked:

But what is key... is the training and induction of principals. Those who are newly appointed ... for them to monitor curriculum implementation and content.

Similarly, a CL/I described the need for mentoring and training principals to develop leadership skills as follows:

I don't know if the principals are knowledgeable enough when it comes to management and leadership. ... You have to help the principal. ... you are workshopping the principal. Let me tell you, the same challenge will come to you... when there is no improvement.

Three CL/Is described how they assisted principals with role clarification so that SMT members could understand their specific roles and responsibilities in curriculum delivery:

To sensitise the principal to the link, the principal, HoD (Departmental Head) and deputy principal, his role and the conversations between the teacher and the Head of Department. The conversations ... reports of the deputy principal and principal.

So, for me my start would be to make sure that every individual understands the role that one plays, taking them from teacher, HoD (departmental heads) to deputy principal, to the principal.

To ensure that the systems are in place, in terms of everyone knowing their role.

The findings indicated a positive shift in the school district's role from enforcing compliance (Narsee, 2006) and monitoring (De Clercq & Shalem, 2014) to working with principals to promote curriculum delivery. Successful curriculum implementation requires effective management (du Plessis, 2013) which district officials perform. Furthermore, district officials play mentoring and coaching roles. According to DiGirolamo and Tkach (2019:201), coaching is a form of participative leadership which can be integrated into day-to-day operations to improve both individual and organisational outcomes. The coach supports the team (SMT)

in activating single and double-loop learning as the double-loop cannot be activated without first mastering the single loop (York, 2021: n.p.). District officials (CL/I) guide the principal in following through to ensure that the SMT functions in accordance with policy.

4.2 Theme 2: Challenges that hinder instructional leadership in schools

One challenge that emerged was that principals felt neglected in terms of their professional development. Principals said that formal training was misdirected or inadequate. When a principal was asked, “So, you haven’t been called from the district for any professional development, you know, to enhance your curriculum delivery?” The principal’s response was “NO!” Similarly, another principal responded “NO!” when asked whether, “In the nineteen years as principal, was there no professional development that you can actually recall that you attended?” A principal expressed their frustrations as follows:

I would say it [professional development] is minimal and from the point of the district official ... they, the curriculum officials, would directly speak to the HoDs (departmental heads) and the teachers and focus on their support in intervention programmes. For the principal... they take it for granted that we’re on par with curriculum and we are managing it.

Another principal remarked that since workshops for instructional leadership were not forthcoming, she would attend union-organised workshops rather than wait:

For myself, as principal I go out myself... for example I am a South African Principals’ Association member. So, I go to the conferences, and I get so empowered. Mathew Goniwe School of Leadership has also added me to their ‘Train the Trainer’.

A secondary school principal believed that developmental workshops were minimal:

I feel there has been but too few and too far, and many a times I forget. In any development, in instructional leadership also, there are things that stand out.

Principals who receive continuous, excellent professional development can be better prepared to lead across their entire range of responsibilities and to promote more effective teaching. OL is concerned with placing capable staff in positions and then empowering them with skills in a way that will have a significant impact on school culture and classroom teaching (Gavoni & Rodriguez, 2016:2). When the school district invests in the development of the principal as an individual and the principal, in turn, invests in the development of teachers, learner performance can be enhanced in the school as a learning organisation (Mestry, 2017:2). OL occurs when principals are equipped to acquire and improve the necessary competencies to lead and manage their schools effectively (McLay & Brown, 2003)

The dilemma seemed to be that the education department expected principals to know their instructional leadership role when they took up their position. This view does not take into consideration that the curriculum was continually changing, and development was required to be kept on track. A CL/I explained:

Principals were interviewed for their posts and in the interview, you asked them all these relevant questions ... The assumption by the department is that they don’t require development... Our situation is changing every day. Things in curriculum, things in education change all the time, so development definitely has to be given.

OL occurs because of experience and an organisation is said to have learnt from an experience when there is a change in the organisation's behaviour or performance. Double-loop learning occurs when we correct or change the underlying causes behind the problematic action. The district's OL outcomes will be evident when the principal demonstrates improved instructional leadership performance at school. By using only single-loop learning we end up making only small fixes and adjustments. That is the main reason why we also need double- and triple-loop learning. With single-loop learning is that it assumes problems and their solutions to be close to each other in time and space.

District officials agreed with principals in terms of the lack of - or inadequate - induction and capacity building for principals. A CL/I expressed concern that the induction for new principals "*takes place only for one day*" further stating that induction "*should be at least five or four days so that principals are trained, you know they are capacitated, of what are their job descriptions.*" Principals are required by the Quality Management System (QMS) of appraisal to provide the district with a list of their development needs. The concern expressed by a CL/I was that the QMS process "*is done in a very haphazard manner.*" The CL/I further elaborated:

Principals do not list their areas for development that they really need. The development that the department is providing is insufficient, basically because it is not practical.

Rather than focusing on principals' instructional development, most school district seminars were aimed at mediating policies related to curriculum changes and administrative issues (Mestry, 2017: 8). There was a need for "a district-wide leadership development strategy that ensures collective capacity building" among district officials and principals (Naicker & Mestry, 2016: 1). For a change to an organisation's "theory-in-use," the education district needed to alter its conceptualisation of the "organisation or their understanding of organisational phenomena and to restructure their activities" (Argyris & Schön, 1996: 16).

Another challenge that hindered instructional leadership in the school district was the poor communication from the school district on curricular mediation. It emerged that principals were excluded from meetings held by curriculum officials with DHs. A principal expressed the following view:

No, I don't think there is direct support for the principal. I feel that it is bottom-up. I don't see it as a real top-down thing that is taking place because we are not part and parcel of meetings that get held with the different [subject] departments.

We need to take responsibility for how we need to change our action or methods and how we can learn from and recognise mistakes and discuss with other people. we learn how to learn by reflecting how we learned in the first place. In district offices as learning organisations, officials should reflect on how they think about rules and not only think that ruled out and establish root-causes of a principal's resistance to implement recommendations.

By applying double – loop theory we can remove the root causes that makes us to behave or action. should be changed. This kind of learning challenges us to understand the overall picture and how the problems and solutions are linked together even when separated widely by time and place. It is also important to notice that with triple-loop learning that districts will be able to understand what conditions that led us to our current situation of by-passing the principal by officials when proving feedback. Organisations can benefit from triple-loop learning when behaviour will change fundamentally because the organisation learns how to learn.

Evidence from another principal corroborated that principals were side-lined. For instance, if a DH reported back to the principal after attending a subject meeting, the principal did not feel adequately briefed. A principal elaborated:

When the department visits the school ... there are gaps where certain things that are communicated to the HoD [Departmental Head] are not communicated to the principal. Sometimes communication is lost in translation. You as a principal, are not really aware of it and yet, it is expected of you to fully engage in the curriculum; you should be knowing each and everything.

It appeared that district officials held meetings and conducted on-site visits with DHs as instructional leadership was distributed among the various SMT members. Principals were neglected from the feedback and requested first-hand information from district officials after school visits and adequate briefing when officials held subject meetings with the DHs. No feedback loop for principals resulted in principals struggling to keep up with the support visits from district officials to monitor and support implementation. As suggested in triple-loop learning which goes even deeper to explore our values and the reasons why we even have our systems, processes and desired results in the first place. This kind of learning challenges us to understand the overall picture and how the problems and solutions are linked together even when separated widely by time and place. An emerging picture is whether district officials view their role as providing feedback to the principal. These officials might simply be visiting the school with a specific focus on the work of the DH who manages instructional leadership at a departmental level. Hence, it may not be intentional for them to sideline the principal.

4.3 Theme 3: Difficulties encountered by district officials in executing their instructional leadership roles

A finding that came across strongly from both CL/Is and CES was that their recommendations or instructions were not followed. This culture of non-cooperation from principals creates a significant barrier to implementing effective instructional leadership. A CL/I explained:

When we conduct the circuit cluster meetings, we develop them [principals]... See ... the narrative, ...we've been doing it many times preparing the principals but when we go to schools, we find them not implementing and we have conducted it many times; I think they are overwhelmed... so much work.

One reason for principals not implementing recommendations from district officials is on account of the changing demands of the principal's work which adds to the existing pressures of the administrative role. Any reflection is directed toward making the strategy more effective, "the basic assumptions behind ideas or policies are confronted"(Argyris 1982: 103-4). The reflection in this regard must come from the district officials who need to support principal manage their time to balance their administrative and IL roles.

Another possible reason for principals' failure to implement recommendations seemed to be their lack of knowledge and skills which impeded their instructional leadership role. This concern was also shared by a CL/I:

I don't know if the principals are knowledgeable enough when it comes to management and in leadership because you would find that they are leaning more on the cluster leader, than them doing their duties... So, that puts you in some kind of pressure as a cluster leader to do their job.

Principals' reluctance to implement recommendations could be attributed to several factors, one of these being a lack of skills. The other is a lack of time owing to the heavy workload they deal with as part of their daily routine. The implications of not implementing the recommendations provided by district leaders, prevents feedback loops (single, double and deuterio) ultimately stifling OL (Kim, 1993). Basten and Haaman (2018: 14) contend that organisational knowledge and learning culture are critical to the success of OL implementation.

A concern of curriculum officials (CESs and DCESs) was the shortcomings in principals' leadership and management skills:

Some of our principals don't work towards meeting deadlines in terms of curriculum coverage ensuring that it happens, submitting documents as requested to the district.

The lack of managerial systems that can ensure efficiency.

The problem that is so much that I've experienced is with principals is serious lack of leadership and management in the principals.

A CES emphasised the importance of collaborating with various sub-directorates and addressing those issues at the district level before expecting principals to know what to do:

Yeah. My view is that the most important thing is to improve the interfacing. You know, between the curriculum sub-directorate and the circuits. We need to change things, from that perspective. Where we need to make sure that we come together and discuss the challenges that we are facing in terms of our expectations for the principals regarding curriculum management and how as a collective we can then move forward.

Collaboration between instructional leaders (district and school), teachers and parents were considered essential for the effective use of instructional organisation methods (Weber 1987: 20).

It emerged that district officials were also affected by work constraints which took them away from the focus on instructional leadership. A CL/I elaborated on the circumstances experienced:

Competing priorities at the district offices from other sub-directorates contribute to CL/I not doing their core functions to support schools with instructional leadership... So, my core function is to support schools, but I am not able because there are meetings, admissions, learner attendance.

CL/I officials expressed their need for greater support from their line managers such as circuit managers who ought to advise them:

In, my experience, I've realised that no matter how hard you try to support ... we on our own ... not getting the support we need from our supervisors... there is no guidance as what you are supposed to do.

I've been an IDSO officer for now, fourteen years and we have never been inducted. We are thrown into the deep end and at the end of the day, we swim. Most of the challenges, we experience are firefighting, complaints from parents, from head office, complaints from stakeholders.

The findings highlighted that capacity building and support from the line manager was important for district officials too. Circuit managers were appointed to guide the work of the CL/I in the school district in the study. However, the CL/I district officials expressed a sense of navigating through situations and difficulties on their own. An important consideration is whether officials at the level of the school district have the necessary capacity themselves to develop others. Naicker (2014: 82) states “it could be difficult to build capacity if there is insufficient capacity to start with.” This means that if district officials are required to guide principals’ instructional leadership that they ought to possess deep knowledge of instructional leaders themselves. A question then arises as to how district officials themselves are being prepared for their instructional leadership role.

OL is critical to making change in the work we do, whether that change is small, moderate, or transformational. Due to ever-changing demands on education districts to improve learner performance, there is a great need for regular refresher courses that are specially designed to support district officials designated to support instructional leadership by school principals.

4.4 Theme 4: District support for instructional leadership

The main ways in which school district officials played a supporting role were expressed in both the views of district officials and principals. District officials stated that they supported principals by ensuring that there were curriculum systems at schools. A CES stated:

I support the principal in ensuring that there are systems in curriculum leadership. Those are the systems that we would then assist the principal to monitor curriculum implementation in the institution and he will be able to support the SMT members with regard to curriculum management in schools.

Furthermore, CESs held meetings with principals to provide guidelines on curriculum management. A CL/Is stated: “*I believe we support the principals by going in, checking on curriculum delivery, monitoring curriculum coverage ...*”. CL/Is guide principals with role clarification of the SMT and support newly appointed principals with how to “*to monitor curriculum implementation.*” A DCES explained that “*there is workshops and training, where the department is from and where the department is going in terms of changes, and in terms of the impact on learner performance data.*”

From the perspectives of three principals, the support they received from the district office was insufficient. In particular, they wanted to be provided with first-hand information from meetings. Furthermore, they wanted to be part of feedback from on-site visits rather than predominantly paper-based feedback as captured below:

They have a lot of HoD meetings. The curriculum unit has a management plan where they liaise with teachers and HoDs. I do say there is a flaw though; they don't liaise with the principals.

I would believe it should be hands-on. It should not be support on paper.

From curriculum specialists, not much [support]. I must be honest with you. What they do is, come to the school. They talk to teachers. They check the books. They normally come to the office after that. They would then try and give a report to me.

The nature of their work did not allow for principals to attend all meetings pertaining to curriculum matters. They are called for meetings where management of teaching and learning is discussed. Despite the views of the three principals who were dissatisfied, most of the principals appeared to be positive about the support received from various district officials as shown below:

The district organises meetings, in-service training and workshops for the staff. And they have a term planner for the staff for training and discussions.

We are called for meetings and the curriculum expectations and curriculum performance are presented to us as principals... making sure they capacitate us.

Look, contrary from what many people say, I get clarity from all the meetings, the school assessment team, meetings give you clear guidelines.

Where all the curriculum people are talking to us, I think really, they are doing well ... and the emphasis is on curriculum. We are always being reminded and informed to say this is how you do it.

I have a very good relationship with the bulk of the education officials, so, if I need any help, I always go to them and they are always very supportive.

Various gaps were mentioned by principals regarding what school districts could do to promote effective instructional leadership. Principals requested greater alignment in the lines of communication:

*Communication should be coming from the **top-down and if I say top-down**, it must be from each and every circuit team manager, cluster leader and the curriculum specialists as well. There should be that chain.*

*They [DCES] could help the principal **first**. Ja ... We are talking about curriculum specialists, not talking about my instructional management but my teachers on how to deliver the curriculum.*

The principal was concerned that “*the focus is to finish the curriculum, come hell or high water, not looking at basics.*” A principal requested more information about specific subjects stating, “*more **unpacking of subjects**, for example, what is expected from the mathematics department.*” Another principal remarked that principals were “*the curriculum manager*” and “*not a [subject]specialist*” requiring “*to be updated, like for instance, if there’s certain documents that I can have with monitoring tools.*” A principal requested more support visits from the school district stating that “*they must increase the number of times they are visiting the schools.*” Furthermore, district officials must “*share good practices*” among principals. A principal requested more on-site workshops from the district while another spoke of the need for the repetition of information:

If you are reminded of everything, about one thing, you tend to master that, so I’m saying continuous curriculum meetings should be the order of the day.

The CES, DCES and CL/Is were seen as having a crucial role in supporting the principal's instructional leadership function. CIL/Is appeared to have a strong awareness of what was going on in the schools they were responsible for, and they spoke confidently about curriculum coverage, school obstacles and specific concerns to consider in school assistance. Interactions between instructional leaders at the intersections of schools and districts have the potential to improve classroom practice, especially if they were initiated and coordinated from the ground up and addressed in context (Mapetere, 2015: 6). When school principals worked with district officials to ensure that schools had all the necessary structures in place to ensure effective instructional practices, OL occurred. Individuals who were used to a particular way of operating over time tended to avoid trying something new and were unwilling to learn or adapt to new techniques which had negative implications for OL.

5. Conclusion

Instructional leadership at the school level is the primary responsibility of the principal. The accountability for learner results at the school level rested squarely on the shoulders of the principal in many school systems including those in South Africa. Principals, however, are part of a larger system as schools fall within the domain of a school district. As such the school district has a responsibility in ensuring that principals have the necessary instructional leadership knowledge and skills to promote learner performance. In this regard, the study findings were positive, that district officials placed teaching and learning matters at the centre of their work. District officials go beyond a monitoring and reporting role to include coaching, mentoring, induction and training. While it emerged that district officials held district meetings to train principals especially where curriculum change required new systems, it was apparent that targeted professional development for instructional leadership was lacking. Principals require greater leadership and management skills so that they could be more effective. Districts ought to build their capacity by bringing on board experts in the field of instructional leadership from their local universities as well as their local and global networks. They will then be able to offer professional development to principals. It was found that principals did not always implement recommendations from district officials which was an area for further attention. Lack of expertise, as well as principals' concerns about their hefty workloads, were cited as possible reasons for not implementing the recommendations.

It is recommended that district officials enable principals to share best practices and provide authentic professional development opportunities in both instructional leadership as well as general leadership and management. This research revealed that district officials in the school district that participated in this study were on the right path in working with principals on instructional matters. Further research in other school districts could be undertaken to ascertain how principals were supported in their instructional leadership role. In re-imagining the role of school districts today, it is recommended that problem solving with principals and empowering principals with the necessary skills to enhance instructional leadership be furthered. This study paves the way for school districts to reflect on and reimagine how they support principals' instructional leadership initiatives.

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