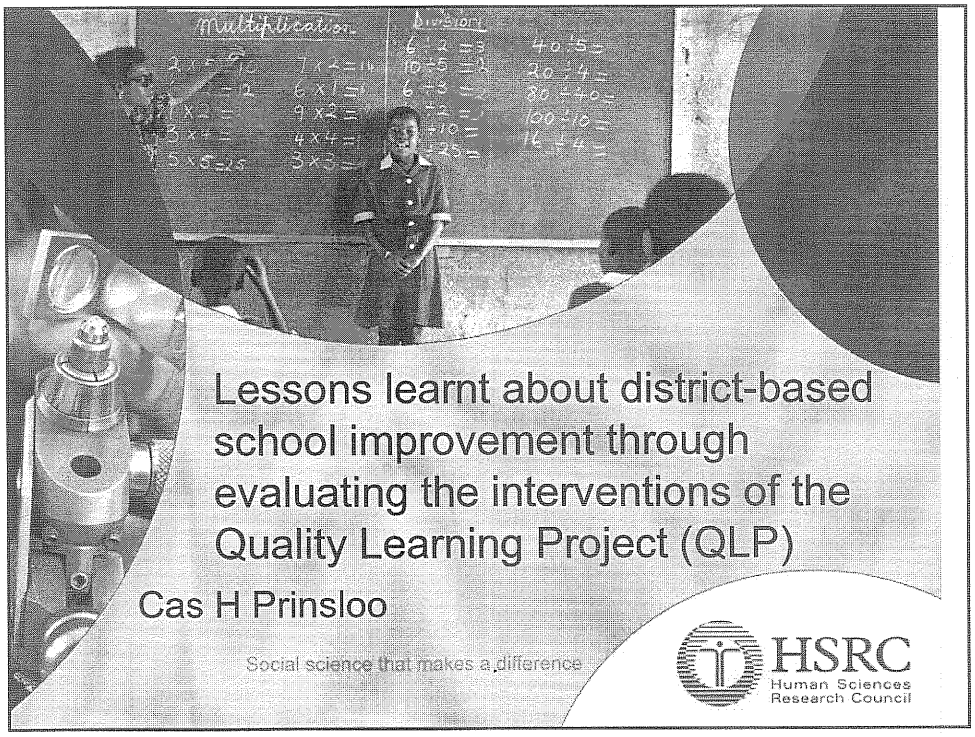

Background

- At the crossroads:
  - From legacies to ideals (and the future)
  - Local relevance and continental / global wisdom
  - Practice, policy and scholarship
- Critical reflection @ empirical illustration

The South African scene

- 12 million learners, 350 000 teachers, 28 000 schools, 9 provinces
- Dept of Educ → District → School
- Self-reliance and self-management @ (central) accountability and control
- Difficulties:
  - How do districts show they meet the challenges?
  - How do evaluators establish causality and attribute responsibility?
  - How are development projects selected and funded?

Recent literature and theory

- Nature of school development projects:
  - Small-scale, service-provider driven, educator-directed support/interventions
  - Large-scale, whole-school approaches

    [Also: top-down, outside-in, standards-based, school-effectiveness @ bottom-up, inside-out, school-focused, school-improvement approaches]
  - Third wave: multi-level approaches (integrated; pivotal role of the district)

Recent literature and theory (cont)

Roberts (2001):

- **School-development planning approaches** – largely excluding the curriculum
- **Combined approaches** – incorporating both management and curriculum-related matters
- **Fleischian multi-level approaches** – with their specific and severe challenges for district officials

Models of school improvement and context (Fleisch):

- Have to be aligned
- Support vis-à-vis control

Types of interventions (schools):

- I – strong external (dysfunctional)
- II – shift to learning & teaching, capacity dev. (transitional)
- III – school-based support (functional)

Taylor's social theory of schooling and its district-level indicators

Support (→) and monitoring (←)

- Social organisation: values, relations, task and time organisation
- Language: proficient in language of instruction, promoting reading and writing
- Curriculum and pedagogy: planning, coverage, sequencing, pacing
- Evaluation: criteria

Advantages and risks of strong district role / decentralisation

- Risks: non-indigenous (or non-local) motivations behind it; adopting policy without tending to strategy; insufficient or shallow understanding of dynamics; lack of coordination; poor quality monitoring; one-size-fits-all resourcing approach; managing the teacher domain; over-burdening
- Advantages: growing parental involvement; strong buy-in from the customer; being cash-strapped brings innovation
- Counterbalances: Autonomy against effective evaluation and accountability

District factors positively related to learner performance (Taylor)

- Language: clear policy and monitoring
- Time management: monitoring of school practices by districts
- Curriculum coverage: construction, distribution, monitoring and support of curriculum standards
- Reading and writing: distribution of books and learning materials
- Assessment: quality assurance and monitoring of learner results

Good practices and emerging models – lessons learnt from DDSP

- Improving the quality of district management (EMIS pivotal)
- Developing theory and best practices for district development
- Not easy to overview the diverse emerging models or pilot the case studies of district development
- Many practical manuals and pro formas are seeing the light

The QLP and its evaluation

- Background (nature, objectives, results)
- Improved quantity, quality and efficiency of school performance output (project schools against comparative group; 2000 → 2004):
  - Passing Matric (overall 19% pts more learners; 36% pts more English HG 2nd language)
  - Passing with exemption (62% pts more learners)
  - Overall passrate (8% pts more learners)
- How much is the effect of district factors?

The role of the district

- As expected, teacher (classroom) and school interventions more strongly explained effects
- Only 2 interventions had an effect on learner performance:
  - District interventions were related to Grade 11 Mathematics improvements
  - Language teacher interventions were related to overall Matric pass rates

(Tables 1 – 3 as handouts)

District functioning aspects that benefited most from interventions

- Design and use of job descriptions
- Financial management
- Within-district planning
- School-support planning
- School-support implementation

(Table 2)

- Also Table 3: functioning → performance

In restructured districts

- Interventions led to lower improvement in district functioning / functionality
- School functioning improved only in project schools
- Gr 9 language classroom functioning only deteriorated in non-project schools
- Gr 11 maths performance did not improve as in project schools elsewhere
- District and school interventions suffered

Benefits from district intervention

- 799 district officials trained
- 17(/17) district development plans were produced and implemented
- 15 districts got EMIS (2 manual)
- 524 SGBs got trained
- 1 277 maths teachers got trained
- 11 536 teachers got trained to use language across the curriculum

Factors that could erode the position and contributions of the district

- Institutional uncertainty
- Absence of standardised terminologies, structures and functions
- Frequent restructuring

Conclusion

- Revisit project schools and districts after 3 to 5 years to evaluate sustainability
- Balance central direction and local initiative / autonomy
- Take "constituencies" along (all levels)
- Focused, targeted and monitored special projects show great promise

Conference: Social Sciences in an African Context, 27-29 September 2006

Presenter: Dr Cas H Prinsloo (Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC),
Education, Science and Skills Development (ESSD) Research Programme)

Topic: Lessons learnt about district-based school improvement through evaluating the interventions of the Quality Learning Project (QLP)

Introduction

As a young democracy, and with many parts of the continent still pursuing the same goal, South Africa is grappling in its school system with a legacy of systems and practices, on the one hand, and with finding and implementing ideal and appropriate new models for teaching and learning, on the other hand.

At this intersection of old and emerging trends, locally sensitive and contemporary theory and practices are at the heart of the search and also this presentation.

Another intersection is at stake too. It is the one between practice, scholarship, and policy. The first is addressed in the paper through references to the assumed strengths and limitations of current district (and related school) practices, both in the QLP project that is overviewed here, and in the broader work reported by other authors. Scholarship is about thinking (and theorising) about what happens in reality in classrooms, schools and districts, and is mainly dealt with in this paper through referring to selected recent literature. Policymaking and policy are about what ought to be done or would work best, and attempts are made towards the end of the paper to make some integrative comments and recommendations in this respect.

Another important justification for addressing the topic of this paper lies in verifying that past and anticipated efforts have been or will be spent on concerns of national (and regional) priority. There is no doubt, fortunately, in the case of the school teaching system that it has a very large role to play in delivering appropriately in the human resource needs of the country. The products of the schools system are expected to be imbued with the desired skills, competencies and knowledge, but also with the capacity to innovate, with entrepreneurship, and with other drivers towards peace, prosperity and citizenship in each respective country.

In our sub-region (Southern Africa) and region (the continent of Africa), we can and should also learn form each other, for the sake of fitting in, for our own good, into the global economy of free-trade agreements and into the dynamics of other social transactions.

To keep the presentation focused against the complex context just described, the paper highlights the role of the district level of the education system in school improvement (reform) activities. Besides the obvious obligation of critical reflection on recent developments and literature, the lessons learnt from recent empirical work (i.e., the QLP evaluation that I had the privilege, with many others, of being involved in), serves as illustration of the various points made. The critical reflection component comprises the first half of the presentation, while the latter half of it deals with the empirical example.

The same purpose of identifying those district aspects that do and those that do not contribute to enhanced teaching and learning at school level, runs through the two sections, irrespective of

whether the point is made in the literature, or is based on observations from the empirical work used as illustration.

Observations based on recent literature and theory

In a system comprising about 12 million learners, taught by over 350 000 teachers, in almost 28 000 schools,[1] it takes no genius to realise that the task of achieving equity and consistency of standards and practices will be daunting. It immediately highlights the need for a hierarchy of delegated functions and responsibilities. These have to be accompanied by various reporting and supervisory lines and mandates. Traditionally the district office has fitted in as the pivotal element immediately between the school and the "nominal" employer, the Department of Education, high up there in the nine provinces or country somewhere. The "Department" had a representative in the district in the person(s) of the relevant official(s) and/or manager(s). (This paper does not allow the time to highlight and refer to special arrangements that exist in the cases of learners with special educational needs, the distinction between independent and public schools, vocational training institutions at FET level, etc.)

One noteworthy variation lies in the sheer differences in numbers of staff, institutions and learners in the large Eastern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal and Limpopo provinces, simultaneously very rural and deprived, the cosmopolitan and privileged provinces of Gauteng and the Western Cape, and the small provinces of the Free State, Northern Cape and North-West. Learners and schools from the first group generally also perform poorly, and schools are more on their own, while the latter two groups do better, with schools not as decentralised geographically, and being more independent.

The roles and responsibilities of districts

The "dichotomy facing schools, and by extension, districts, is one of greater central accountability and control alongside increased demands on schools to be self-managing and ultimately self-reliant" (Fleisch, 2002:3). Depending on whether either or both of the school or district fails (or succeeds) in their respective roles and responsibilities, benefits or disadvantages will accrue for the account of the school or the district. This situation of competing or contradictory demands renders it quite difficult for:

- districts to demonstrate meeting their challenges;
- evaluators to decide on whether or not challenges were met, or not, and if they were not, who is to blame; and
- provincial departments and funders to make the bewildering choices about supporting or not supporting a plethora of district-development and other projects, programmes and initiatives.

Fleisch went on and argued that international research findings seemed to favour or recognise that local government agencies are key to large-scale and sustainable change in schools. However, this is premised on a few further arguments, mainly pertaining to how such development projects are categorised and approached. Iuxtaposed, or in succession, were small-scale service provider driven and educator-directed support and interventions, and large-scale or whole-school development approaches.[2] The terminology of top-down or outside-in (or standards-based or school

[1] Department of Education presentations to the Education Portfolio Committee of Parliament, 13 June 2006.
[2] National policy on Whole School Evaluation (WSE) accepted ongoing district-based support as key (through teams of full-time evaluators), but also school management, leadership, governance, the curriculum, staff development, and financial planning). Also note that the Integrated Quality Management System (IQMS) overtook (combined) WSE and other initiatives (such as the Developmental Appraisal System, or DAS, which had been the only system negotiated with and endorsed by the labour unions.

effectiveness) [3] and bottom-up or inside-out (or school-focused or school improvement) approaches have been used widely in this regard.

A so-called third wave of multi-level approaches, in some sense transcending or superseding the school-improvement *vis-à-vis* school-effectiveness dichotomy, resulted. Consensus and working at all levels were pointed out as essential. The district-level has always been recognised as pivotal.

Roberts (2001), partially in correspondence with Fleisch above, similarly distinguished between:

- school-development planning approaches (largely excluding the curriculum),
- combined approaches (incorporating both management and curriculum-related matters), and
- the Fleischian multi-level approaches.

The latter posed very specific and severe challenges for district officials, who already appeared overstretched in terms of resources, functionality, skills/expertise and capacity. This approach, in addition, also required visionary training and support modes and initiatives, and scaling-up methods, within a drive to institutionalise school reform.

The bottom line of Fleisch's exposition and recommendations is that models of school-improvement and the context in which they operate (infrastructure, data, staff, capacity, etc.) should be aligned to be able to determine the (best) role of the district. A more supportive role (e.g., capacity development, mentoring, and provision of learning materials) can be accepted where schools (and districts) are already strong above a critical minimum level, and show good internal control. Strong external pressure and control, emphasising accountability, seems to be premised on more serious school failure. The decision about which way to go is about the correct balance between the two for the case in point. The levels of resources, target setting, accountability, sanctions, rewards and incentives for districts themselves, and not only for schools, are part of this configuration. Also, at the school level, learner performance and systemic (bureaucratic) functionality are the two pillars holding up the system. It should not be forgotten that also service providers should adhere to some minimum skills, capacity, methodology and related requirements, should they become involved in district or school improvement programmes within the context of all of what have been said above.

In another forum, Fleisch (2001) had earlier introduced the now familiar notions of Type I, II and III schools and their ideal concomitant interventions. They can be summarised in the following way:

- Type I signals almost total functionality failure, requiring the strongest possible external intervention,
- Type II signals transition to a better level of functioning, through a shift to instructional priorities of learning and teaching, capacity building, and being weaned off external support, and
- Type III spells maximum reliance on school-based support.

After an earlier paper by Taylor (2002) on accountability and support as the two pillars of systemic functionality, situated within his analysis of approaches to school development, [4] Taylor, Muller and Vinjevold (2003:3-18) further expanded on the accountability and support dimensions of the role of the district in school reform, and provided much more detail about the respective elements of accountability and support. They also engaged in a substantive argument on why districts mattered (2003:118-127), by deriving 26 district-level indicators from the social theory of schooling they presented in the same publication. These indicators had/have social organisation, language,

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[3] Taylor, Muller and Vinjevold, 2003:3-18 (Ch 1).

[4] Without concrete indications yet about the district as the face of the Department at the school level.

curriculum and pedagogy, and evaluation as their four central elements (2003:122). For the various constructs, the sub-constructs and indicators include the following:

- Social organization: social values (as embodied in curriculum documents and distributed to schools in the form of curriculum statements and the associated resources such as pacesetters); social relations (manifesting in open within-district, between-district-and-schools, and with-superiors-in-the-province relations); task organisation (clear definitions of roles and functions and filling of district posts, underpinned by good management information and performance management); time organisation (planning and direction of district activities to core business, and maximising of teaching time and staff attendance at schools);
- Language: proficiency in the language of instruction (LOI) (with accompanying programmes at schools to develop that, and monitor its implementation); promotion of reading and writing (along clear district policy lines and accompanied by monitoring its implementation, as well as proper procurement and management of school books);
- Curriculum and pedagogy: planning, coverage, sequencing and pacing (including regular formal assessment tasks, monitoring of coverage, INSET for teaching and management staff at schools, related support to and monitoring of the work of principals and teachers in the classroom); and
- Evaluation: explication of evaluation criteria (through quality assurance of the frequency and content of tasks against curriculum standards, monitoring results at district level, and the use of such results to improve teaching and learning through remedial planning and support.

In short, all the arguments above, as indeed pleaded from the beginning by Taylor and Vinjevold (1999) too, pointed out that the reform strategies required by each school will be different, as determined by its level of functionality. This has implications for the role of the district too.

Support and monitoring also formed two of the four core activities from inside the Department of Education in their thinking as framed in the Tirisano [5] plan (Quality Education for All Statement of Public Service Commitment by the Department of Education during January 2000).

However, Chisholm, Hoadley, Wa Kivilu, Brookes, Prinsloo, Kgobe, Mosia, Narsee and Rule (2005) also alerted readers to the fact that schools may find themselves on the horns of a dilemma when the various Department of Education requirements start taking effect fully. Teachers did seem to start suffering under the load of demands pertaining to common tasks of assessment (CTAs), Continuous Assessment (CASS), implementation of the still new OBE/NCS, and the IQMS system, for instance, in this confluence of support and accountability. Especially the requirements related to the latter may erode teaching time and time on task, and add to teachers' sense of being overburdened and to their growing frustration. This frustration may easily be directed at the first point of interface, being the districts, where all the returns and submissions, sheets and mark schedules, and other documents, are due. All of these go under the rubric of an increased load of administrative work.

Also Peltzer, Shisana, Udjo, Wilson, Rehle, Connolly, Zuma, Letlape, Louw, Simbayi, Zungu-Dirwayi, Ramlagan, Magome, Hall and Phurutse (2005:94), pointed out the importance of the job satisfaction element. The causes of job dissatisfaction could easily be projected onto the Department, especially onto the district office, and the district blamed for directly causing the increase in workload (2005:99-100). These voices are echoed by Hall (with Altman, Nkomo, Peltzer and Zuma) (2005), in relating the influences from the political environment to the teaching profession as potential contributor to a higher workload and stress.

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[5] Working together to build a South African education and training system for the 21st century.

Advantages and risks related to a strong district role

De Grauwe, Lugaz, Baldé, Diakhaté, Dougnon, Moustapha and Odushina (2005) tried to establish through a UNESCO study, through its International Institute of Education Planning (IIEP), where the developing countries' fascination for decentralisation comes from. [6] Four case studies were undertaken of countries in West-Africa. They propose that thrusts to decentralise are mostly driven by sharing the financial burden, which cannot be carried by centralist regimes, or by trying to avoid over-ideological interference. Be it as it may, it was found that decentralisation could, but need not, improve education quality (as schools are strong autonomous factors either way), depending on whether school autonomy was made to succeed, or not. Decentralisation was often enforced by external pressure from international development agencies and experts, and by political factors in the national context, where public authorities did not succeed in organising and funding the relevant basic public services. Again, one of the risks behind whichever the choice, could be that the motivations do not take the specific country context in mind.

Two other concerns (raised by De Grauwe and colleagues) are:

- the adoption of policy without attending to strategy and to the practicalities of implementation (especially the changes to institutional cultures required), and
- an insufficiently deep or systematic knowledge about how schools and district are impacted on by such a decision.

District offices are often not able to take on their newly assigned responsibilities through lack of capacity and other disparities.

Decentralisation mostly means:

- devolving some authority for basic education to elected local government level, such as municipalities and villages,
- expanding the role of regional and district offices (in terms of budget, and the appointment of school principals, for instance),
- expecting schools to take on a greater role in resource management, and
- empowering communities.

Once these things started happening, of special importance would be:

- the success of the newly arranged relationships between education offices, local authorities, schools and communities (as there is still wide leeway for many dynamic outcomes),
- the extent of retention of some quality monitoring by the local (i.e., closest in level - this often is something equivalent to district offices) education office of the teaching in schools, referring actually to inspections at regular intervals (and the available resources for it, within a strong strategic planning ability, and obviously, the control and support received from schools themselves, including senior/head teachers),
- the strength of financial resources and arrangements both at the district and the school (with the accompanying transparency and accountability problems, unevenness between the ability of local communities, and the habit of district/national authorities to (have to) implement a one-size-fits-all approach not differentiating finely enough in terms of the relevant needs, and
- managing the teacher domain, including recruitment, placement and contracts that acceptably deal with public and privately or otherwise appointed staff (often then through minimum requirement specifications.

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[6] Glewwe and Kremer (2005:44) noted, however, that rigorous empirical evidence in support of the impact of decentralised reforms was still very scarce. A recent UNESCO (2005) document also testifies to it being an ongoing debate, warning about double-edged potential policy outcomes, and the uniqueness of every country situation.

Positive elements of decentralising were considered to include:

- the increased and growing involvement of parents,
- the strong buy-in from the "consumer", and
- the fact that being cash-strapped leads to innovation.

The main lesson from the foregoing scholarly inputs is that autonomy has to be counterbalanced by effective evaluation and accountability.

Its largest threat lies in the absence of transparency in the local management of resources. It also has to be remembered that decentralisation does not automatically mean or imply the withdrawal of the state.

Taylor (forthcoming) highlights five factors as positively related to learner performance in conjunction with functioning or practices at district (or higher) level:

- language (i.e., clear policy guidelines and monitoring by the district or larger system),
- time management (i.e., monitoring of school practices by the district),
- curriculum coverage (i.e., the construction and distribution of curriculum standards, and general monitoring and support of coverage),
- reading and writing (i.e., the distribution of books and learning materials), and
- assessment (i.e., quality assurance and monitoring of learner results).

It is often not easy or possible to isolate the effect that district support has on learner performance improvement. That was the case too in terms of the development, administration and implementation of Assessment Resource Banks at Grade 3 level in the USAID-funded (United States Agency of International Development) District Development Support Programme (DDSP) evaluated by the HSRC (Claassen, Makgamatha & Masehela, 2003).

However, the publication issued at the end of this initiative (DDSP, 2003) provides many useful pointers based on the good practices and emerging models noted during the initiative. Such lessons learnt would, with regard to specific district actions, and in overlap with some of the publication's main sections, include contributions such as:

- improving the quality of district management (with core district elements being to use EMIS (Education Management Information Systems) for important decision making relating to just about every aspect of infrastructure and resources, human resource management, learner performance, job descriptions and organigrams,
- developing theory and best practices for district development (within a district-improvement framework, with special reference to school support perhaps the most critical element (built on two pillars, being whole school improvement and district improvement), but also including the management of partnerships and grants, project evaluation, the systems and indicators used to record and track whole school evaluation, changing attitudes and practices related to the district as such to achieve its higher prominence, and rethinking School Quality Assurance Frameworks (e.g., IQMS),
- overviewing emerging but diverse models of district development (including examples or case studies piloted in specific provinces), and
- issuing many practical manuals and pro formas (ranging from governance, school development plans, assessment, job descriptions, policy development, planning, school support visit tools/instruments, financial management, curriculum management, staff development and evaluation, quality assurance and EMIS.

The Quality Learning Project (QLP) evaluation

The Quality Learning Project was a five-year long school-improvement intervention running from 2000 to 2004. It was funded by the Business Trust (to the tune of R137 million), who partnered with JET Education Services as their programme managers. The independent evaluation was contracted to the HSRC.

The result, in response to setting out to improve the performance of 530 schools, was that the quantity, quality and efficiency of output, respectively measured through comparing:

- the numbers of learners passing their matriculation examinations,
- the numbers of learners achieving a pass with endorsement (exemption), or mathematics at Higher Grade level, and
- the overall school matriculation pass rate

for the sample of 70 project schools against a comparative group, improved with a margin way beyond that of the QLP project's own control schools, or the larger matriculation group. All the findings are reported in detail in Kanjee and Prinsloo (2005) and Prinsloo and Kanjee (2005) in the core and technical evaluation reports respectively.

The detail relating to the achievement introduced above, at Grade 12 level, comprised (Kanjee & Prinsloo, 2005:xii):

- 19 and 36 percentage points more learners in QLP schools than in the project's control schools in 2004, compared to 2000, passed their matriculation examinations and the subject of English Second Language Higher Grade (quantity);
- 62 percentage points more learners from project schools than from control schools passed matriculation with endorsement in 2004 against the baseline of 2000 (quality); and
- the overall pass rate in project schools increased by 8 percentage points more in project schools compared to control schools over the period.

To what parts of the project could this success be ascribed? The relevant question for the present paper is how much of it can be ascribed to district interventions, functioning or factors?

Modelling showed that teacher/classroom interventions and school interventions most strongly or frequently led to school functioning improvements, which in turn were associated with improved learner performance outcomes. However, in the modelling, district interventions were also shown to play some part in improving school functioning.

In the instance of district interventions in the immediately preceding 2003 to 2004 period, it led to Grade 11 mathematics performance improvements at the end of 2004. This was one of only two cases where any interventions could be directly modelled onto learner performance effects. The second was language teacher interventions that were related to overall matriculation pass rates. This latter finding is quite significant in view of the language-across-the-curriculum approach of the QLP.

Also, the dosage of district interventions was reasonably easily maintained among some other intervention fatigue effects. The reason could be that the project had a very strong central steering committee-based management structure, with the district officials and provincial coordinators having sat together in Partners Forum and other provincial coordinators meetings with the programme managers (JET) and service providers at least on a quarterly basis for the duration of the project.

Overall district functioning improved over time, presumably because of the QLP intervention programme. However, it has to be noted that the project design did not provide for control groups

here, because of whole-district participation. The aspects of district functioning that appear to have benefited most were the design and use of job descriptions, financial management, within-district planning, school-support planning, and school-support implementation. This conclusion can only be made by understanding that the interventions and evaluation of functioning were based on the same logic model. (Some of the findings just mentioned are unpacked further down. A few more project design and evaluation features have to be acknowledged first.

The roles and responsibilities of districts

The QLP model followed can be described as a conventional logic model or causal framework. The project was also premised on the support and monitoring role of the district office. About ten service providers focused on a variety of interventions aimed at secondary schools and the district layer above them. These interventions included teacher development in mathematics and language across the curriculum (reading and writing skills in terms of the languages of learning and teaching), as well as district and school management and development. The final criteria comprised learner performance measures, such as pass rate improvements, pass numbers and performance scores, as already indicated.

"The approach was adopted to enhance the prospects of sustained change" (Business Trust, 2005:30). It would ideally serve to overcome some challenges facing interventions, resulting in their never "securing the conditions for long-term sustained change".

Sustainability, therefore, has been a core value in the QLP through design, as also in the current star ("naledi") schools project for improving mathematics and science performance (Dinaledi).

Broadly speaking, the model postulated that the increase of demands on the school and teachers to deliver better performance would be met if the district was enabled to provide high quality support to schools, whose school governing bodies (SGBs) and school management teams (SMTs) would in turn be trained to manage their schools more effectively, under which circumstances teachers would be trained to teach their subject better, resulting in the improved teaching quality that would lead to improved learner performance.

Without underplaying the importance and complexity of matters such as curriculum management and delivery, assessment practices, and the use of LSMs, for instance, at the classroom level, or human resource management, financial administration and general school development and planning, in support of curriculum management, only the district element is unpacked in more detail from here on.

Effective functioning of the district office was premised on:

- effective organisational development, planning and management,
- effective human resource management, and
- effective financial management.

These three elements would empower a district for its two core tasks, that of:

- effective school support, and
- effective school monitoring.

"The district office was assumed to aim at having two important effects on teaching and learning processes. The first is to hold schools accountable by setting targets and monitoring their performance against these targets, and the second is to provide support to schools in order to assist them in meeting the targets." (Prinsloo & Kanjee, 2005:22).

The key indicators / indices formulated for the desired outcomes of the intervention project at the district level, can be summarised as in Table 1.

Table 1: QLP project outcomes and evaluation indicators at district level

Outcomes	Indicators
Effective human resources management *	Existence and use of organigrams Existence and use of job descriptions
Effective organisational development and planning *	Effective financial planning
Effective support to schools	Provision of Learning Support Material (LSM) and curriculum statements
Effective district planning	Within-district planning for development School-support planning Implementation of support plans In-school support of SMTs and educators
Effective school monitoring	Effective monitoring of learner performance Use of learner performance data
Effective monitoring of school functionality	Existence and quality of school monitoring plans Categorisation of schools School finance monitoring

* *Poor response rates and limited data prevented the development of additional indicators pertaining to performance appraisals in the first, and asset management and curriculum planning in the case of the second indicator.*

Thus, the interventions at the relevant levels of the education system (district, school and classroom/teacher), were aimed at building the institutional capacity to manage, support and monitor education activities between the district and school, and between the school and teacher. In as far as district interventions go, the district development programme "comprised the provision of training on organisational development and the management of personnel, finances, resources and information to equip district officials to monitor and support schools more effectively" (Prinsloo & Kanjee, 2005:231). Intervention data was collected per semester, and adjusted through extent of challenge or workload (i.e., numbers of staff and schools under its jurisdiction, and physical or geographic size) from the surveyed dosage figures to appropriate coverage indices. The district indicators were grouped into five clusters in terms of which the number of interventions that occurred, attendance ratings per staff category, the total duration of such interventions, and the rating of the quality of each category of events, were recorded. The categories of interventions were grouped into:

- organisational development, planning and management;
- human resource management;
- financial management;
- school monitoring; and
- school support.

Because of the small sample (analyses had to be done at school level), data aggregation had to be undertaken. This was not done before checking for homogeneity of trends across intervention phases (between baseline and mid-term, and mid-term and summative) and across indicators (collapsing all of them eventually into one).

An observation made was that interventions were targeted to need, [7] and stayed consistent or increased in coverage over time, but slightly reduced in quality. The former implies that where school or classroom functioning was good, interventions may have been reduced.

[7] Such findings are not repeated further among the modelling results reported later in Table 3.

Instruments to measure district functioning were at all times designed to cover a variety of information sources (qualitative and quantitative information; even district-based and non-district based, i.e., a user-satisfaction component) and included mainly interviews and document reviews.

With regard to the district sample, 17 of the most poorly performing districts from all nine provinces were selected for the interventions, and all the schools in such districts participated. This determined some of the dynamics of the intervention and evaluation models. One aspect already mentioned, is the fact that control districts were not a possibility. Another aspect is that the possibility of having control schools only fortuitously arose when early restructuring had put some schools (in four provinces) outside the boundaries of the nominated districts, fortunately before interventions began, avoiding contamination effects and comparability issues. A final matter is that regression to the mean would be a serious threat, as districts and schools were deliberately selected as poorly functioning, and in need of attention. This could, at the other end, also imply that they would be too dysfunctional too absorb the assistance, which may have happened in isolated cases.

All the schools in the 17 districts participated, with slight exceptions, bringing the tally of schools to about 530. District profiling in terms of characteristics pertaining to staff capacity, age, qualification levels, experience and numbers revealed nothing to be concerned about. The managers, however, were predominantly male. The exception was very high school-to-LAS ratios. Such understaffing would only predict inefficient teacher and curriculum support. With three or four Institutional Development Specialists (IDS) to every one Learning Area Specialist (LAS), the situation is further aggravated. However, one mathematics LAS for every 280 schools and one language LAS for every 214 schools is just not good enough.

Detail pertaining to selected findings

In addition, to the core findings now presented, some critical remarks are made towards the end about the advantages/strengths and disadvantages/weaknesses surrounding district data collection, analysis and modelling.

District functioning after the programme were still only in the moderate range, at the overall level, reflecting a score of 6.55 in 2004 on a composite index ranging from 0 to 13, with a theoretical average of 6.5, slightly up from 6.02 in 2002.

As mentioned earlier, the aspects of district functioning that appear to have benefited most from interventions were the following, with an indication of the increased index scores (standardised to give a minimum of 0 and a maximum of 1) from 2002 to 2004:

- design and use of job descriptions (0.47 to 0.53), still in the moderate range,
- financial management (0.14 to 0.25), in the low range,
- within-district planning (0.48 to 0.53), still in the moderate range,
- school-support planning (0.46 to 0.64), up firmly from below the theoretical mean to a high-moderate level, and
- school-support implementation (0.35 to 0.44), leaving some room before escaping the below-par range.

It is heartening to see that one of the core mandates of the district is covered by good improvements in terms of the final two bullet points above. However, in reference to what was shown earlier in Table 1, no school monitoring indicators improved dramatically, although in many cases it was a case of holding station around or slightly above the theoretical mean at moderate levels of functionality.

The details behind the five indicators that showed improvement are unpacked further in Table 2. Only indicators that improved by more than 10% from 2002 to 2004 are shown.

Table 2: District functioning indicators assumed to have improved through QLP interventions

Indicator *	Contents	Minimum	Maximum	2002	2004
Job descriptions (6 lo, 8 mod, 3 hi)	District managers, IDSs, LASs, and admin staff possession and rating of its value to the district manager in managing the district	0	9	4.27	4.81 mod
Effective financial management (12 lo, 3 mod, 2 hi)	Spending authority / autonomy, financial planning, budget details, MTEF budgets, budgeted year plans, financial monitoring mechanisms, monthly expenditure reports, expenditure patterns monitored against budgets	0	29	3.99	7.25 lo
Within-district planning for development (8 lo, 0 mod, 9 hi)	District manager, LAS and IDS on existence and quality of MTEF plan, 3-year plans, annual plan, monthly plan, and LA improvement plans, detailing activities and timeframes, setting objectives, allocating personnel, monitoring plans	0	11	5.23	5.80 mod
School-support planning (5 lo, 4 mod, 8 hi)	District manager, LAS and IDS on existence and quality of district support plan, system to categorise schools, monthly activity plan, information on school priorities	0	11	4.13	5.63 mod
School-support planning and implementation (7 lo, 6 mod, 4 hi)	District manager and IDS on possession at district of lists of schools, school staff complements, school development plans, school year plans and composite school timetables, drop-out rates, use made of school profiles (identifying schools requiring attention)	0	13	4.49	5.72 mod

** Indications are given of the number of districts with low (lo), moderate (mod) and high (hi) level functioning, which respectively always cover the bottom, middle and top thirds of the theoretical index score range.*

The outcomes of the modelling of causal effects pertaining to district functioning is summarised in Table 3. Only statistically significant findings are reported. The regression coefficients were calculated during Structural Equation Modelling using AMOS software.

Table 3: District-relevant significant findings from Structural Equation Modelling (SEM)

Criterion (predicted)	Predictor	Probability	Standardised regression coefficients
Maths Gr 9 2002	District functioning 2002 *	0.011	0.299
Maths Gr 11 2002	District functioning 2002 *	0.048	0.232
District funct 2004 **	District intervention 2003/4	0.000	0.392/0.395/0.362
District funct 2002 #	District intervention 2001/2	0.072	0.223
Maths Gr 11 Teacher functioning 2002	District intervention 2001/2 *	0.006	0.312
Maths Gr 11 learner performance 2004 ***	District intervention 2003/4 *	0.001	0.307

* *Assumedly through Maths LASs.*

** *In Gr 9 Reading & Writing, Gr 11 maths, Gr 11 Reading & Writing models.*

*** *Senior learners close to Gr 12 are favoured.*

\# *In Gr 12 Eng HG and language pass rates models.*

The effect of district restructuring

Without reporting all the variations in terms of the various criterion or functioning, performance, and pass-rate outcomes, suffice it to state that the effects of district restructuring were visible in many parts of the system during the QLP evaluation. The unique position of having the same districts, but different project and control schools, brought a few additional pieces of information to the fore.

The fact that some districts had been restructured and other not, enabled meaningful analyses, and the following significant findings were made:

- In restructured districts, the QLP interventions were not associated with the same substantive improvement of district functioning from 2002 to 2004 compared to non-restructured districts, suggesting that QLP acted as an additional burden to already strained districts. It could also be that such districts were so dysfunctional, that the interventions could not be absorbed.
- In restructured districts, school functioning increased significantly in only QLP schools, and not in control schools, suggesting the remedial benefits of the QLP.
- Grade 9 language classroom/teacher functioning only deteriorated in control schools from restructured districts, suggesting that the absence of both QLP interventions and systemic stability were very detrimental there. Again QLP interventions could have saved the day.
- Grade 11 mathematics learner performance improved best in QLP schools in non-restructured districts.
- Restructuring also had a negative effect on district and school interventions.

Strong functioning and the important role played by the district

In relation to a target of 3 500 set for the number of district and school officials to receive training, the eventual number was 3 760 (7% above) (Business Trust, 2005:29-31). [These figures include 799 of the 799 district officials to receive training.] These figures suggest that a substantive capacity development achievement has been made, and provided low enough staff turn-over rates, sustainability of the QLP effects should be good. Seventeen district development plans were produced and implemented to varying degrees. Fifteen of the 17 districts got EMIS, while the remaining two had/got manual versions. The number of SGBs that got trained was 524, while 1 277 mathematics teachers, and 11 536 teachers to use language across the curriculum received training too.

Factors that could erode the position or contributions of the district

It has to be acknowledged that "... institutional uncertainty about the structure and function of district offices and frequent restructuring and staff changes, make systematic improvement in this vital link in the education system difficult" (Business Trust, 2005:30). Also, many "... South African schools, especially in the rural areas, continue to suffer because of the lack of efficiency and basic functionality at the district and school levels" (2005:31).

The above could either point towards an inability so far to reach clear conceptualisations or definitions of the structures, posts and obligations required at the district-level office, or, should that have been understood sufficiently, a lack of will, resources and capacity to implement it effectively.

There is a chance that the absence of standard terminologies and structures to precisely describe hierarchies, jobs and functions between provinces and districts, could jeopardise quicker progress in this regard. To illustrate the point, some of the designations found at present are listed. They include: Institutional Development Officials or Specialists (IDOs/IDSs), Education Development Officials (EDOs), District Development Officials (DDOs), Education Development Centres (EDCs), Education Management Development Officials / Centres (EMDOs / EMDCs), Learning Area Specialists (LASs) and their alternates in the form of subject or curriculum advisors, and the ubiquitous districts, areas, regions, circuits, and macro-versions of each of them.

Capacity would include the requisite expertise and experience among the incumbents.

As witnessed in the QLP, restructuring were empirically found to hamper school support and monitoring, and other related activities. (Some of the QLP districts got restructured five times in three years. Such behaviour is bound to undermine sustainability and continuity.

Irrespective of the methodological and sample limitations related to the QLP, it was still possible to use sophisticated analysis and make useful discoveries, as reported above. This spurs academics on to find more robust designs, which would include and entail tracer or longitudinal studies, larger samples, and more theory-driven work, to allow trustworthy and wide generalisation to the system as a whole.

Similar interventions could follow many of the design and analysis features of work such as this. An eye should be kept open for an opportunity to revisit some of the QLP and control schools within another year or two to investigate, follow-up on or review the extent to which the previous intervention's impetus has been sustained.

With regard to knowing where to go from here in terms of positioning the district, the call may be, as in Canada (OISEUT, 2001:xii), to balance central direction (as in a clearly articulated and well-known national strategy) and local initiative (such as with the coordination role of Local Education Authorities (LEAs), in this case, which lie somewhat between our districts and the schools), not neglecting the importance and the role of the larger infrastructure (meant to refer to the teacher corps and profession and their subject skills and teaching practices, especially with a view to sustainability.

Not enough can be said about taking the constituency along, and as a result, buy-in from all stakeholders is key.

An example to the opposite could be the low sustained success rate of the so-called Education Action Zones (EAZ) intervention commissioned by the Gauteng Department of Education. Not involving the line-function structures in the province in the implementation, but rather external service providers only, may have led to a still birth.

However, an important lesson from the Education Portfolio Committee submissions by the Department of Education (cited earlier), may indicate that focused and targeted special Departmental projects (such as expanding to 2008 the pursuit of increasing mathematics and science passes at HG through Dinaledi, and the QIDS-UP programme delivering infrastructure development and basic equipment and books to the poorest quintile of schools), in the context of ASGI-SA and JIPSA, may be one strong way to go.

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Topic: Lessons learnt about district-based school improvement through evaluating the interventions of the Quality Learning Project (QLP)

Abstract: The Quality Learning Project (QLP) was a five-year long school-improvement intervention running from 2000 to 2004. It was funded by the Business Trust and managed by JET Education Services. It followed a conventional logic model or causal framework. The project was premised on school support and monitoring by the district office. The interventions implemented by service providers in secondary schools comprised teacher development in mathematics and language across the curriculum (reading and writing skills in the languages of instruction), and district and school management and development. The final criteria were changes to the pass rates, pass numbers and performance scores of learners.

The rationale of selecting 17 of the poorest performing districts from all nine provinces for the interventions determined some of the dynamics of the intervention and evaluation models. Some of these dynamics are highlighted, as they may have had specific impacts on the project and evaluation samples and the success of the interventions. Core findings are presented and critical remarks made about the advantages (strengths) and disadvantages (weaknesses) of the specific approaches selected for information collection and data analysis and modeling.

Conclusions and recommendations focus on the value, replicability and sustainability of similar interventions and evaluations.

Keywords: Teaching, learning, education, school improvement, district functioning.