
Self perception of a South African urban school district

Clive Smith

Abstract

International literature on school districts argues for the centrality of district support and capacity building in any school change process. Despite this, both internationally and nationally, districts have tended to be the ‘neglected layer’ in school systems. After 17 years of our new school dispensation, South Africa still has no formal district policy. This paper, that reports on part of a larger district support project, is a case study of how an urban school district sees itself. The project draws on an adapted Lewinian action research approach to change. Focus group interviews were held with the key role player groups in this district. All district role-players described themselves as stressed, frustrated and demoralised. Nevertheless, there are pockets of vision and energy in the district that believe, with competent leader facilitation and structural and psychological space, they can make a difference.

Introduction

This paper reports on an urban school district’s self-perception. It is part of a three-year long school district support project, involving a South African University, a Provincial Department of Education and an American university graduate school of education. The project employs an adapted Lewinian action research approach to change (French and Bell, 1999) that entails three phases i.e. data generation and feedback, envisioning and enacting change, and review of the change followed by further vision alignment and action. This paper reports on the data generation phase.

Internationally, efforts at school change have drawn attention to the important role of the school district as an intermediary between central education offices and schools in sustainable school improvement (Corcoran, Fuhrman and Blecher, 2001; Elmore, 1993; Massell, 2000). Fullan (1991; 1992) argued that schools cannot redesign themselves and that districts play an important function in establishing the conditions for continuous and long-term

improvement for schools. According to Massell (2000, p.6), in the US districts are “*the* major source of capacity-building for schools” in the school reform process. In South Africa (SA), although the National Department of Education (DoE) had already launched a District Development Project (DDP) in 1998 to improve district effectiveness (Mphahlele, 2001), it was only about 10 years after the new political dispensation in 1994 that school improvement initiatives began to focus on the school district (Chinsamy, 2002). Nevertheless, 17 years after the introduction of a new school dispensation, South Africa still has no formal district policy, though a policy is reportedly being drafted (McKinney, 2009; Prew, 2010).

Despite the espoused importance attached to school districts referred to above, internationally there is a tendency to ignore districts in school reform (Roberts, 2001). This prompted Spillane and Thompson (in Roberts, 2001, p.1) to refer to school districts as the “neglected layer” in the educational system. This would appear to be the case in SA too. Furthermore, there is little published research on school districts in SA (Khulisa Management Services [Khulisa] and the Centre for Education Policy Development, Evaluation and Management [CEPD], 2003), and what research had been done up to 2003 was often superficial (Sadie n.d.).

This paper is intended to make a modest contribution to the research on school district functioning in SA. It begins with a short overview of school district research in SA, followed by a brief explication of the research design. I then present and discuss a selection of data. In the conclusion I summarise what one may learn from this study and pose a few questions.

Literature

Internationally, in the school hierarchy, school districts represent varying degrees of decentralisation. In some cases they enjoy a substantial degree of autonomy and stakeholder participation in decision making. They have the freedom “to define clearer priorities for themselves, to get rid of bureaucratic clutter and render an account of quality and performance to parents and other stakeholders” (MacBeath, 2006, p.5). The opposite end of the school district spectrum is reflected possibly in SA where during the apartheid era, that is before 1994, the education system was characterised by a highly centralised policy- and general decision-making process and well-developed

decentralised structures through which to implement policy and decisions (Gallie, Sayed and Williams, 1997). While managerial decisions were made at the central departmental level, school districts were solely accountable to the central department for policy compliance, implementation and monitoring without reference to other stakeholders (Department of Education [DoE] 1996a). In effect, districts were administrative units “functioning as post offices passing down” decrees from above (Khulisa and CEPD, 2003, p.11).

De Clercq (2002b) observed that with the new education dispensation in SA after 1994 school districts represent a diluted form of decentralisation where provincial governments delegate “some administration and decision-making authority to lower levels to plan, manage and administer on its behalf with a tight upward accountability system” (p.86). School districts are thus a form of administrative rather than education decentralisation that can have real influence on schools and classrooms and that are accountable to local school stakeholders.

In theory, there is a tension between districts providing professional education support to schools and districts being administrative units operating as a controlling inspectorate (Narsee, 2006). It is a tension between, on the one hand, district upward accountability and downward control and, on the other hand, district support for the legislated policy of school self-management reflected in the South African Schools Act (DoE, 1996b). McKinney (2009) pointed out that, “Such tensions in the nature of the function of districts, as well as the locus of control between districts (as representatives of provincial and ultimately national departments of education) and schools derive from the dual roles of *accountability* and *support* (emphasis in original) that districts are most often called on to perform” (p.8). In Taylor, Muller and Vinjevd’s (2003) view, there is a reciprocal relationship between accountability and support. Earlier, Taylor (2002) had written “Accountability measures give direction, set performance standards, and monitor outcomes; they are used to manage staff and resources; they offer incentives, and administer rewards and sanctions as a consequence of performance. Support measures empower individuals to meet the expectations set by these demand drivers: they build capacity, provide training, establish systems and structures, and distribute resources” (p.3).

According to Fullan (1991), successful change requires both upward accountability for central policy mandates and downward accountability for school-by-school assistance. Perhaps the issue is the type of mix that needs to

occur (Fleisch, 2001). There is a need for national direction on where the weight should fall, on what should characterise school districts.

Roberts (2001) foregrounded the support role of school districts, arguing that districts need both to be organisationally (in their internal functioning) and instructionally (in their influence on teaching and learning) effective. However, districts themselves lack the internal capacity to support schools to achieve that to which they (the districts) are to be held accountable (Taylor 2002). McKinney (2009) pointed out that district staff, subject advisors in particular, often need specialised training to perform their curriculum support and monitoring role (see also DOE, 2000, 2009b; Narsee, 2006; Prinsloo and Kanjee, 2005; Roberts, 2001). The same is true for leadership and management capacity (McKinney 2009). This need for district capacity building and resourcing was already recognised before 1994 (NEPI, 1992). And McKinney (2009) referred to DDP interventions in 1998 intended to enhance districts' capacity to support schools, relating to curriculum practice, management, whole school development, internal functioning and capacity.

In practice, perhaps more or less because of this lack of internal capacity in districts, accountability is foregrounded to such an extent that the support function is hardly visible. A decade ago, Mphahlele (1999) found that administrative, managerial and political tasks dominated districts' work. McKinney's (2009) helpful review of recent SA research on school districts came to the same conclusion (see, for example, Bantwini, 2009; De Clercq, 2002b; Department of Education, 2009b; Narsee, 2006). However, this accountability is not focused on teaching and learning, the 'new accountability' (Fuhrman, 1999). Rather it takes the form of classical bureaucratic accountability that concerns itself with monitoring policy compliance (De Clercq, 2002a) in accordance with districts' imposed provincial purpose to do just this. De Clercq (2001) noted that in the early days of the Gauteng Department of Education's (GDE) existence, districts were seen as the "kingpin between the provincial department and the schools and were there to ensure regular and reliable feedback on policy implementation and school change" (p.44). Schools reported that they rarely experienced support but most often experienced policy compliance pressures. Narsee (2006), for example, found that schools experienced district intervention "more as pressure than as support" (p.178) and that district officials spend most of their time on "monitoring and policy compliance activities, rather than school development activities derived from the problems of schools themselves" (p.178).

Although there is little empirical data on district functioning in SA, what data there is is consistent in demonstrating mostly dysfunctional school district offices. The Quality Learning Project (QLP) (Kanjee and Prinsloo, 2005), that was designed to support and improve district functioning in 17 districts across SA, found declining district functioning in a number of provinces over the five-year life of the Project. Overall, the Project described most of the districts that it worked with as functioning moderately. McKinney (2009), found that school district problems could be classified into six areas: ongoing reorganising with its accompanying disruption; inadequate human and material resources capacity that included inadequate and inappropriate staffing, inadequate information and communication technology and understanding, and inadequate and unreliable transport; inadequate management and administration systems, including little sense of mission, absence of job descriptions and poor, if any, management information systems; lack of alignment between school district offices and provincial offices, such that the provincial offices dominate, that creates conflicting demands for districts (“district officials . . . look up at the PHO, for their agenda, rather than at schools” [Narsee, 2006, p.133]); lack of decision making authority related to issues such as staff appointments, staff discipline, procurement, maintenance and infrastructure; and lack of a budget for training, service provision and discretionary spending.

It was against this background that the partnership to support an urban school district was initiated.

Research aim

The aim of the research was to find out from research participants their experience and perceptions of the school district, with a view to identifying what they believed to be the key issues related to the effective functioning of the district. These data were intended to inform the start-up of the three-year long intervention in the District.

Methodology

This is a qualitative study located both within the interpretive and critical paradigms. According to Stringer (2004) qualitative research entails “interpretive studies resulting in detailed descriptive accounts of people’s

subjective experiences” (p.16). Merriam (1998) observed that generic qualitative research seeks simply “to discover and understand . . . the perspectives . . . of the people involved” (p.11).

The research also has a critical purpose. Critical research is intended to improve participants’ situations, rather than for them to simply accept and cope with their present situation (Hosch, 2002). This research is concerned with raising an awareness within the district of the need for change and ultimately with the project partners facilitating change towards a more desirable state, as determined by the research participants (Janse van Rensburg, 2001). The project draws on a Lewinian action research approach to change (French and Bell, 1999). This paper reports on the first, data generation, phase of the action research cycle.

The research was conducted in an urban school district in the Gauteng province of SA. The district consists of 232 schools, of which 55 are public secondary and 151 public primary schools. The great majority of the schools are to be found in a former black African township. The district has 193 non school fee paying schools. One hundred and seventeen schools are classified as ‘underperforming’. The district office has 285 staff (Personal communication, 2011).

In order to explore the participants’ experiences and perceptions of their school district focus group interviews (Morgan 1988) were held with homogenous groupings of the key role players. A focus group interview was held with each of the following role player groups: the district management team, Institutional Development Support Officials (IDSOs), curriculum advisors, the district administration and school principals. Triangulation of data sources (Denzin, 1978) was made possible by including participants from each of these role player groups. This was intended to enhance the diversity and quality of the data. Besides the principals, who were invited by the district management, the other groups all received an open invitation to participate in the focus group discussions. Each focus group had on average 10 participants. The average length of service in the respective positions ranged between four and eight years.

Each discussion started with introductions, followed by me giving a short explanation of the purpose of the interviews. I then proceeded to ask group participants to talk about their experience and perceptions of the district. I used a gap analysis approach (Schmuck and Runkel, 1994) in my follow-up

questioning i.e. besides inquiring into their current experiences and thoughts, I also explored how they would prefer things to be in the district and what ideas they had and what resources and support they needed to get there. The ensuing discussion in each group lasted on average between two and three hours.

The school principals, by virtue of their location in schools, were only able to comment from the 'receiving end', being accountable to the district office. They were unable to comment on the inner experience of the district office.

Interviews were transcribed verbatim. I applied a generic content analysis approach to analyse the data. Content analysis allows for the construction of knowledge through the identification of themes and patterns within the data (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2006). I immersed myself in each transcript in order to identify and label what I call categories, For example, I labelled as categories accounts of 'chaos' or an example of a senior district official taking an off-the-cuff decision without any thought as to its consequences. These categories were in turn clustered into the themes presented below, such as planning and coordination, communication and so on. In some cases categories could fit comfortably into more than one theme. For example, some categories would fit equally well under coordination or communication. The allocation of qualitative data to categories and themes is seldom a neat and tidy affair (Wolcott, 2010). Formal ethical protocols (Borg and Gall, 1989) relating to informed consent, and confidentiality of sources and anonymity of participants and places outside of the focus groups, were applied.

In the data presentation and discussion that follows, after each theme is introduced, I provide a selection of quotes from the various focus groups that capture the participants' experiences and perceptions related to each respective theme, in their own words. Space limitations necessarily required me to be selective in doing this. This raises the question of "authorial voice" (Wolcott, 2009, p.16). Wolcott (2009) observed that when researchers provide "thick descriptions" (Geertz, 1973, p.5) and where research participants are capable of telling their stories themselves it raises doubts about the extent to which the researcher should make his or her presence felt. With the occasional exception, my preference is to foreground the participant and to place myself in the background, where I provide the linkages and continuity, off stage as it were. This is somewhat akin to one of the conventions of an impressionist tale (Van Maanen, 1988).

The first and most prominent theme is Planning and coordination.

Data presentation

Planning and coordination

Despite one of the district's "four pillars" being the provision of "relevant, coordinated and effective support to schools" (personal communication, 2011), all district roleplayers reported high stress levels and a great deal of frustration and demoralisation caused by a lack of planning and coordination at all levels of the system. They identified coordination and planning as "the biggest problem." Words such as "chaos" and "haphazard" were common in all the focus groups. The following are some of the comments.

You'll find that Head Office has got its own plan without consulting with the districts. The districts have got their own plan without consulting with schools . . . The left hand does not know what the right hand is doing (IDSO interview, p.9).

There is no collective planning. That causes this chaos (IDSO interview, p.7).

Our greatest achievement is that we are still in existence! (District Office Management interview, p.10).

IDSOs expressed the desire to participate jointly in decision making,

We need to sit down together and develop the how part. It's pointless one person in management somewhere doing it and saying, 'This is what we want to do.' There's no buy in. No-one knows that's going on (IDSO interview, p.38).

A principal reported,

Sometimes you need to come to the district office three times in one day. One unit calls you, 'Immediately, please ma'am, we need your signature now.' You come. Immediately when you get back to the school another phone call. And it must be the principle. You cannot say because you went earlier maybe the deputy principle must go now (Principal interview, p.37).

These quotes reflect an absence of a systems perspective (Schmuck and Runkel, 1994) in the district and in the province as a whole. Each level in the hierarchy seems to operate in isolation of the others. According to Weisbord (1987), "systems can be improved only to the extent that everyone who works in them understands how they work" (p.251). One also sees evidence of a dependence on the PHO (Narsee, 2006) and the tension between upward accountability to the PHO and to attending to their and the schools' priorities (McKinney, 2009). Finally, this data points to a lack of leadership and

management competence (McKinney, 2009; Roberts, 2001) that is a recurrent pattern in all the data. This lack includes a dearth of communicative competence.

Communication

Closely related to the lack of planning and coordination is a lack of effective system-wide communication (Schmuck and Runkel, 1994, p.142). This is manifest in the, “Left hand not knowing what the right hand is doing.” For example,

Registration of learners, admission must happen from July up to September. If you go to my neighbourhood and ask parents, ‘When do you register kids?’ they say, ‘On the first day of school in the new year.’ Somebody created that new policy (admissions from July to September) somewhere but forgot to feed the information to the relevant people. The parents still don’t know. If you tell them about it at school they think you want to be smart (Principal interview, p.37).

In another example cited,

(Computer training providers) promised to come to train educators. Everybody was ready on Wednesday for training for five days which was supposed to start at half past two. No-one came. No explanation. That’s the district office (Principal interview, pp.37–38).

Numerous examples were cited of programme changes not being communicated to those involved. This results in frustration, disrupted plans, wasted travelling, unnecessary costs and unproductive work time.

District managers reported,

You run programmes and projects for the department but you find that schools say that the programme belongs to the district and they dump it. We do not communicate. There is a lack of synergy among stakeholders. We need to be doing these things together (District office Management interview, p.6).

District officials’ professional identity

That the district (and schools) are in a habitually reactive mode plays havoc with roleplayers’, district office officials especially, sense of professional identity. A number of issues relating to district office officials’ professional

identity emerged. These relate to their sense of purpose and mission, their role and their focus.

In response to a prompt to talk about what they do (to illustrate their sense of purpose), all of the participants in the respective groups used terms such as 'ensure compliance with policies, circulars and regulations,' and 'monitor and check'. A few district managers referred to 'curriculum delivery' and IDSOs to 'supporting and developing school management'. However, on closer questioning it turned out that this all referred almost exclusively to compliance related issues.

It is 10 years since De Clercq's (2002a) research revealed that many district officials "understand their work narrowly as passing down policies and ensuring that the latter are implemented at school level" (p.116). Considering the structural positioning of district offices, accountable to their provincial head offices (PHO) rather than to schools, it is not surprising that policy implementation and compliance has dominated the work of districts (De Clercq, 2002b; Narsee, 2006). McKinney (2009), too, found 'little sense of mission' in districts.

The ambiguity surrounding district officials' professional identity is also related to the absence of any clear sense of their, the IDSOs in particular, role. For starters, they have no job descriptions. McKinney (2009), in her SA school district research literature review, had a similar finding. Besides moving up and down delivering messages to schools (Khulisa and CEPD, 2003), IDSOs are summoned to schools to deal with problems regarding finances, security, broken windows, damaged fences, blocked toilets ("why should I monitor that a toilet is not in use when I'm unable to do anything about it. It is a waste of my time" [IDSO interview, p.7]), collapsing ceilings, conflicts ("principals are not able to deal with conflicts so we go in and clean up the mess"), staff disciplinary issues (because "principals fear to give leadership because of the unions") . . . the list goes on. "We are trying to assist our schools in whatever challenge they are facing. We are generalists." (IDSO interview, p.2)

Concerning focus, even in the district office, any aspirations toward a greater sense of purpose are thwarted,

We have our unit meetings every Friday but because there's an agenda from the administrators in terms of what they want us to jump to . . . we end up focusing on the

administration and not our own challenges . . . So you actually don't move on to improvements (IDSO interview, p.37).

This rhymes with Mphahlele's (1999) finding that administrative and managerial agendas and priorities dominated districts' work.

Follow up and follow through

Part of the planning malaise can be found in the absence of any decision making follow up mechanism. This relates to poor, if not the absence of, documentation procedures.

Normally, at the beginning of each term, there is an activity which is called 'school effectiveness' whereby we go out to see to it how ready are schools for day one. When we come back with the information we don't get feedback on whether anything is done about it. Most of the issues are beyond our means to do anything about ourselves (IDSO interview, p.9).

And another,

. . .like infrastructural challenges (maintenance, for example). We don't receive feedback and you'll go next time the next year, the very same school that you went to, you'll find the same challenges. You come back again, you report again. You'll be expected the following year to go to that school and you'll find the very same challenges. So it's a waste of time (IDSO interview, p.9).

That's why we always work on backlogs (District Office Management interview, p.10).

And because there is no evidence (no documentation – my addition) to say that this was done yesterday at this school the principals are aware of the fact so they ignore it. We never progress (IDSO interview, p.10).

Besides the lack of management competence already mentioned under planning and coordination above, this points to an absence of an effective management information system (McKinney, 2009).

Work ethic and commitment

A number of district officials commented on this. For example,

. . .another challenge that we need to address is the work ethics of educators, of district officials as well. There's very limited work ethics amongst too many of our people. 20% of us are doing what 80% should be doing (District Office Management interview, p.10).

Another observed,

. . .also there's no sense of urgency. We'll wait for three days or people will wake up on the last day when it's the due date. That's also why we always work on backlogs. It stems from a lack of commitment and work ethics . . . Some of us are here for the wrong reasons (District Office Management interview, p.10).

McKinney (2009), in her literature review, referred to inappropriate staffing and a lack of managerial decision making authority related to issues such as staff discipline, and staff appointments referred to in the next section.

Political interference in appointments

IDSOs believe they should play a central role in selecting school managers, including principals,

Most of the dysfunctionalities at school are based on the selection of the SMT (School Management Team) members . . . We know the type of person that should be appointed for that particular school but when the appointment gets to the director level, he does not agree with that appointment. And you'll get the unions coming in who bulldozes the process. Unions are still given that latitude of choosing comrades for positions. But we know our schools. Eventually that IDSO gives up and then we say, 'Let it go.' (IDSO interview, p.22).

The situation appears to be no different in the District Office,

We have too much interference in the appointment of personnel in the district office. We have a union influencing the whole process in terms of who should get into a post. At the end of the day it affects teaching and learning because you don't end up appointing a competent person (District Office Management interview, p.8).

Accountability and feedback

As a district manager put it,

It is so nice to work in the public sector. Once you are appointed, whether you are delivering according to expectation or not, you will remain in that post. That is what is killing us as well. I don't think in the private sector that can happen . . . if they are achieving nothing, moving them to another position, even promoting them (District Office Management interview, p.16). Someone needs to be accountable for what is happening (District Office Management interview, p.6).

As far as feedback is concerned, an IDSO said,

We would love to get feedback, both downward and upward, as long as whether positive or negative, it's constructive. We need to know where our weaknesses are so that we can change them around (IDSO interview, p.26).

In Lewin's change model (French and Bell, 1999), feedback is used for ongoing reflection and as a self-regulation monitor in learning organisations. Feedback gets issues into the open, enables people to express resistances and fears, to talk about the unspeakable and helps them become aware of their own contribution to situations. Feedback provides the lever for change as it is most often the point at which change readiness is triggered. It releases the emotional energy required to engage in change (Weisbord, 1987). This all requires competent leadership and management.

Capacity development and change

Reference has already been made in the planning and coordination section to the need for leadership and management development. District managers bemoaned the fact that,

We lack leadership and management, in our own institution too. The Department doesn't, when we appoint people, develop them on an ongoing basis so that they become competent and be able to deliver (District Office Management interview, p.8).

However, according to the participants there is no shortage of interventions. In response to a question about leadership development,

When we develop persons we won't see value for our money because when it comes to implementation people do not implement that. I don't know how many workshops those principals have attended but when they come back they were not able to implement what they have learnt. If a person doesn't want to learn or if a person doesn't want to change, there is nothing that is going to happen (District Office Management interview, p.15).

Concerning workshops,

No-one knows whether the workshops benefit anyone – there is no monitoring or follow up. (District Office Management interview, p.1) "IDSOs can't get schools to send SMTs to training workshops, 'Because they've already been trained.' But there is no evidence of any change in the school. Are we getting value for our money? It is not there." (District Office Management interview, p.1).

On average, IDSOs have attended 10–15 courses and workshops, but look at the implementation! (District Office Management interview, p.1). Another manager commented,

There is no impact study. All these activities are taking place but no monitoring and evaluation (District Office Management interview, p.2).

Some IDSOs made mention of historically derived development programmes that are just rolled out year after year whether or not they serve any useful or relevant purpose. (IDSO interview, p.28)

Once again, the themes of follow-up and follow-through and feedback and accountability come to the fore.

Technology and resources

Principals complained of inadequate financial and material resources.

In response to a question regarding technology use for communication, a principal responded,

Documents have a tendency of getting lost and disappearing. So we physically submit so that you make the person sign; there's evidence of you submitting the document. I once submitted a document ten times. (Principal interview, p.37) (Name of district) is not workable for that. Technology is a no-go area. We have no management information systems (Principal interview, p.37).

Transport was mentioned in all the focus groups,

Transport in schools is the biggest concern. On any given day educators must move. It's money. The teachers don't have money and the schools don't have money. That means they lose out. (Principal interview, p.37) When we tell our educators that funds are not available they accuse us of withholding funds (Principal interview, p.5).

The curriculum specialists reported that the 12 of them have 120 schools to support with access to only two cars. Some use their own cars but battle to get refunded for fuel. They also have to share computers. (IDSO interview, p.26)

And the district managers,

We have two cars in our unit. Both are out of order. When I spoke to transport, he indicated government garages don't want to give cars back because they are finished, kaput. Currently my people (curriculum advisors) are stranded at the office. They can't go out to schools, because we don't have cars (District Office Management interview, p.10).

The same refrain is sung concerning computers, photocopiers, telephones, office space . . . The list goes on.

Inadequate material and financial resources, inadequate information and communication technology and understanding, inadequate and unreliable transport, lack of decision making authority related to issues such as procurement, maintenance and infrastructure and a lack of budgetary resources are all mentioned by McKinney (2009).

Conclusion

In the light of the literature presented earlier, McKinney's review in particular, it's not unlikely that the experiences described here will resonate with readers in many districts throughout the country. The research participants' experiences suggest that there is no evidence in this district of any change for the better. Despite my attempts to illicit from the research participants something positive about their district experience, besides the rare idea for change and a few research participants who expressed a fervent desire to do something about the situation, I met with no success. Perhaps Herzberg's (Herzberg, Mausner and Snyderman, 1959) 'two-factor' theory of motivation applies. According to this theory, dissatisfiers related to factors such as working conditions, supervision and policies need to be addressed first before motivators such as work challenge, responsibility, recognition, achievement and growth will influence participants' feelings about their work and their productivity.

The research participants raised issues that I've not come across in the SA school district literature, or that have at least not been explicitly mentioned. These are

- Work ethic and commitment that refer to attitudes and motivation
- Follow up, follow through and feedback that refer to management processes
- Political interference of unions in appointments that points to the need for a systemic approach to this particularly SA challenge

In summary, what seems to be needed in the district is a radical organisation culture transformation led by visionary and empowered leaders. Michael Fullan (1992) concluded that sustained improvement requires serious restructuring of the school, the district and their inter-relationships, and that schools and districts will never be able to manage innovation without radically redesigning their approach to learning and sustained improvement. More radically, Calkins, Guenther, Belfiore and Lash (2007), drawing on the report of the New Commission of the Skills of the American Workforce, *Tough Choices or Tough Times*, suggest “eliminating the school district as we know it now” (p.23). Noting that school districts are notoriously difficult to change, they suggest that what is needed is a reinvention of the district model from within. Perhaps the vision set out in the 1996 Task Team report (South Africa, 1996) could inform any such radical transformation process. The vision embraces contemporary leadership and management concepts such as

- Change leadership and management (pp.16, 29)
- The learning organisation (p.31)
- Participative leadership and management (pp.16, 30, 33)
- Team leadership (p.14)
- Value-driven leadership (p.29)
- Reflective practice (p.25)
- Facilitation (p.32)
- Self-management (pp.12, 29, 31)
- Organisation development (pp.16, 33)

However, the million dollar question in any change process is, ‘What is the level of readiness,’ as it relates to the systemic conditions for change, organisation capacity to change and individual desire – or at least willingness – to change?

- *Systems level* – To what extent are National and Provincial education policies, norms, practices and structures conducive to action? To what extent would the system allow for a suspension of traditional bureaucratic practices relating to districts’ systems, structures and

processes and the creation of ‘turnaround zones’ (Calkins, Guenther, Belfiore and Lash, 2007) where comprehensive, dramatic and rapid change can be facilitated and institutionalised?

- *Organisation (district) level* – It seems clear from the data that the district lacks the knowledge and capacity to help itself. There is also a lack of trust. What is unknown is the extent to which a critical mass of the formal district leadership and roleplayers *want* to change.
- *Individual level* – Judging from the interviews, there are roleplayers champing at the bit to do something, to make a difference. These are the people who ought to be supported to the hilt.

Finally, “dare we consider that perhaps our educational system and those who work in it are not open to, or capable of, change? . . . Have we really created a new mindset for change or is the status quo being quietly retained because we have in fact an education system that is fundamentally conservative and organised in ways that thwart educational innovations? Is it realistic to go on introducing reforms in a situation that might not be geared to change?” (Hope, 1998 – in reference to Namibia).

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Clive Smith
University of Johannesburg
Department of Education Management and Leadership

csmith@uj.ac.za