# Dynamics of middle tier support in the South African education system: contextual and institutional influences

**JET Education Services
Learning Generation Initiative**

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# List of acronyms

| | |
|---|---|
| **CCM** | Chief Circuit Manager |
| **CESM** | Classification of Educational Subject Matter |
| **CM** | Circuit manager. |
| **CMC** | Circuit Management Centre |
| **CSI** | Corporate Social Investment. |
| **DBE** | Department of Basic Education |
| **DP** | Deputy Principal |
| **ECD** | Early Childhood Development |
| **EFAL** | English First Additional Language |
| **ELRC** | Education Labour Relations Council |
| **FET** | Further Education and Training |
| **FGD** | Focus Group Discussion |
| **FP** | Foundation Phase |
| **GET** | General Education and Training |
| **GP** | Gauteng Province |
| **Gr** | Grade |
| **HCS** | Head of Curriculum Support |
| **HOD** | Head of Department |
| **HR** | Human Resources |
| **ICT** | Information and Communication Technology |
| **IIEP** | International Institute for Education Planning |
| **IP** | Intermediate Phase |
| **ISPFTED** | Integrated Strategic Planning Framework for Teacher Education and Development |
| **KII** | Key Informant Interview |
| **KRAs** | Key Responsibility Areas |
| **KZN** | KwaZulu-Natal |
| **LGI** | The Learning Generation Initiative |

| | |
|---|---|
| **LIEP** | The Language in Education Policy |
| **LTSM** | Learning and Teaching Support Materials |
| **MTPs** | Middle-Tier Professionals. |
| **NGOs** | Non-governmental organisations |
| **NPOs** | Nonprofit organisations |
| **NSC** | National Senior Certificate |
| **OECD** | Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development |
| **PEDs** | Provincial Education Departments |
| **PLCs** | Peer Learning Communities |
| **PLCs** | Professional Learning Communities |
| **PPN** | Post-Provisioning Norms |
| **Prov. Director: TPD** | Provincial Director for Teacher Professional Development |
| **SGBs** | School Governing Bodies |
| **STEM** | Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics |
| **TCH** | Teacher |
| **TPD** | Teacher Professional Development |
| **UKZN** | University of KwaZulu-Natal |
| **UNESCO** | United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation |
| **WC HCS** | Western Cape Head of Curriculum Support |
| **WC** | Western Cape |
| **WCED** | Western Cape Education Department |

# 0 | Executive summary

## Introduction

An education system's largest investment and greatest lever for change is its education workforce. While teachers and principals tend to be the most visible members of this workforce, in all education systems there are middle-tier professionals who are critical to delivering quality education and serve as the link between schools and the national level. These professionals have an important two-way role in implementing and adapting policy at the local level and also ensuring issues affecting schools feed back into central-level planning and decision-making. Recent research on the middle tier suggests that they can positively impact education outcomes.

In this paper, the middle tier refers to the education professionals, structures and relationships within an education system that are situated between the school and national levels. While the design of the middle tier depends on contextual factors, including the level of decentralisation in a country, many share similar mandates and functions, from providing accountability and support to schools, to overseeing resources and finances, to deploying teachers and human resource management, for example.

Most research suggests that the middle tier impact education outcomes through their responsibilities for education management and instructional leadership. However, the evidence is nascent in low- and middle-income contexts. Across contexts, more work is needed to understand specific practices that the literature has identified as promising, including middle tier support for teacher peer collaboration and resource management for equity and inclusion.

Although individual and organisational middle-tier practices are central to improving education outcomes, their effectiveness is often determined by the institutional structures and norms in which they work. Importantly, contextual factors, such as socioeconomic and geographical realities – interact with and often drive institutional challenges. Currently, there is limited research on the institutional challenges – such as resource constraints or unclear priorities and standards – that the middle tier faces in undertaking both management and instructional support, and there is little research or practical examples for how to address these.

Although research on the middle tier has grown over the past decades, it is important to note that in many contexts, data is limited, making it difficult to get a basic understanding of the middle tier, including its composition, or what percentage they make up of the entire education workforce. This also has implications for understanding inclusion and the middle tier. It is well known that women tend to be under-represented in leadership positions in education, and the lack of data on the middle tier has contributed to the limited understanding of the barriers women face at the middle-tier level of education systems.

## Overview of the research

This research, undertaken by JET Education Services, forms part of broader work being conducted by the Learning Generation Initiative (LGI) to help address the gaps in evidence on how a stronger middle tier can positively influence education outcomes, including teaching and learning. This research seeks to address the specific gaps outlined above by providing new evidence and insights from the South African education system. The research explored the challenges and innovations in middle tier professional's practices in education management and instructional leadership as well as the institutional factors that frame how the middle tier undertake these responsibilities. Contextual factors were explicitly investigated to better understand how they interact with institutional issues to impact middle tier effectiveness.

In addition to a summary of global evidence on the middle tier and a review of the existing literature of the middle tier in South Africa, this study generated new data using a mixed methods approach through a combination of surveys, interviews and focus group discussions undertaken with teachers, principals and middle-tier professionals (MTPs) in one district in the KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) province. Interviews with middle-tier professionals from Gauteng and Western Cape provinces enabled a comparative analysis of themes that surfaced in KZN.

## The South African context

A 2012 South African education policy on the organisation, roles and responsibilities of education districts argues that effective districts can improve the quality of schooling for learners and provide a common approach for the coordination of functions between national and provincial departments to ensure coherence of functions in working with schools. This policy highlights the critical role of district officers in creating equitable, quality education across schools, which aligns with growing evidence pointing to the critical role that middle-tier leaders play in education delivery and as instructional leaders for teachers and principals, particularly in under-resourced areas (Childress et al., 2020; Mc Lennan & Orkin, 2018)

National policy in the democratic period in South Africa has had to grapple with the very real effects of apartheid spatial and social planning on the material realities of schools. These realities include ageing infrastructure; lack of sufficient classrooms, sports facilities or recreational spaces; community poverty, unemployment or crime; distance from further economic and learning opportunities; and weak public service infrastructure, including the availability of clinics and police stations (Bantwini, 2014, 48; Makhalemele & Nel, 2015; Ncwane, 2019; Nhlumayo, 2020; Nkambule, 2018). These effects were planned outcomes of apartheid policy, intended to map material inequality over the hierarchical segregation of 'race' groups (Soudien, 2012).

The 2012 policy aims to address the learning inequalities the system faces by leveraging South Africa's middle tier, comprising provincial and district officials, to serve as a critical link between the nationally set Department of Basic Education (DBE) policies and their implementation at the school level. Within each province are district officials who serve as the primary interface between the provincial heads and schools. Each district is further

subdivided into circuits which serve as 'field offices' for district support, thus overseeing local implementation and designated administrative and professional support and monitoring functions. They are  led by circuit managers who are middle-tier officers that carry out a multitude of responsibilities, which include curriculum support, educational improvement, and administrative tasks. Subject advisors are deployed at provincial and district levels and are meant to be content specialists, to oversee the analysis and management of teaching and learning outcomes data, undertake curriculum monitoring and ensure policy compliance. The key difference between subject advisors and circuit managers is that the latter also oversee managerial and operational issues related to school governance as a whole, including being the direct supervisors of school principals.

# A summary of the findings

The research explored the challenges and innovations in middle tier professional practices across education management and instructional leadership with a focus on the institutional factors that shape how the middle tier undertake these responsibilities. Contextual factors were explicitly investigated to better understand how they interact with institutional issues to impact middle tier effectiveness.

## Contextual factors

Findings from KZN emphasise the impact of the country's apartheid history and the influence of the current socio-economic and geographic context on education delivery and the support that the middle tier provide. **Poverty, rurality, issues of safety, and school and middle-tier capacity limitations were identified as creating challenges to middle-tier professionals' ability to visit schools with sufficient frequency, as well as increasing the amount of time they spend managing operational needs instead of providing instructional support.** These challenges may not be unique to rural communities, but they are intensified when multiple deprivations intersect to form structural barriers to quality education (Myende & Maifala, 2020). Under positive conditions, rural schools can function well and provide high-quality education comparable to that provided in urban schools, while offering a different and perhaps more personalised and localised educational experience (Moletsane, 2012).

**Another contextual factor that surfaced in this study was the influence of political actors on middle-tier effectiveness**, specifically teacher unions. One finding shows that collaboration between middle tier professionals and political actors in the education system can be positive for teachers. An example highlighted by a participant of a partnership between middle-tier professionals and teacher unions on teacher lesson observations illustrates how political actors can positively mediate spaces where there is a history or culture of low trust between the middle tier and teachers. However, findings from this study also reveal that unions can negatively impact hiring practices, creating serious issues in ensuring there are sufficient and qualified middle-tier staff.

Finally, this study explored the **role of gender in South African society and its impact on the middle tier**. Middle-tier participants in the three provinces included indicated that there was continuous support for women to apply for leadership positions, and funding was also

ring-fenced for this purpose. Once in post, gender and race tended to intersect in participants' experiences of challenges in their professional journeys; in one middle-tier professional's example, working with previously segregated schools as a woman of colour sometimes resulted in attacks on her qualifications, capacity or seniority to do her job. However, over time, women indicated that they were able to cultivate relationships of mutual respect and trust with sometimes resistant stakeholders. As women leaders reflected on their personal journeys, a common thread emerged of collaborative, entrepreneurial and service-based approaches to leadership that leverage the skills and talents that others bring to the table; that rely on more, not less, delegation and development of mutual trust; and that thrive through open communication and constructive feedback.

## Institutional factors

This study illustrates that myriad institutional factors significantly impact the effectiveness of the middle tier. One finding suggested that there is **uneven prioritisation of the different educational phases by the middle tier, with less attention paid to the crucial developmental needs of learners transitioning through the Foundation Phase (Grades 0-3) to the Intermediate Phase (Grades 4-6)**. Participants emphasized the need to adequately address learning issues in the foundational phase, and highlighted that, the transition to English at Grade 4 further complicates support needed for those falling behind who will be unprepared for higher-grade demands.

This issue of middle tier prioritisation can be linked to South African education policy priorities, which strongly emphasise the importance of Grade 12 matric examination results and view them as an indicator of system functioning. The national government invests heavily in the Further Education and Training Phase, and part of this is geared towards 'mopping up' the cumulative learning gaps that result from successive years of low or uneven educational quality. Participants in this study emphasised the need for focusing on foundational learning in the Foundation Phase. **This is an example of how the institutional context – in this case, national priorities and incentives - can promote potentially inequitable middle-tier practices, even if inadvertently**.

Participants noted that there is only so much strengthening that can be done in upper phases to help students catch up. They emphasised the need for the middle tier to prioritise foundation phase to reduce reliance on upper grade interventions (bootcamps, catch-up sessions, etc.). They also noted that the middle tier should focus on the linguistic needs of learner transitions between foundational and intermediate phases.

This study also found that the capacity of the middle tier impacts the quality of support they are able to provide. This issue was highlighted across several of the study findings, including constraints around subject advisor knowledge and training. **Findings suggest that subject advisors do not always possess adequate knowledge within and across phases, as well as of the general content area and subjects they are responsible for**. They need capacity development to be able to effectively support teachers and departmental heads across different subjects and grade levels. Moreover, their instructional and curriculum support also needs to address current challenges such as multi-grade or

overcrowded classrooms, managing the academic timetable in the context of other school services such as daily nutrition (which can take an additional hour or more from the school day) (Cooper et al 2019), and providing alternatives to homework where this is a deterrent to learner participation.

Subject advisor training is provided through districts, which oversee the training of trainers, but participants indicated that **much of the support provided at this level is based on some form of 'cascade' model that relies on successive translation by officials from the middle tier to schools. If a weak link exists in this process – such as an underqualified subject advisor being expected to provide important workshopping on curriculum changes to departmental heads – the effects can be disastrous**.

The research shows that middle tier professionals face **staffing and resourcing issues – another key institutional challenge - these include insufficient staff, vacant posts, limited resources and travel funding**. This often means a limited capacity for instructional support and reduced number of school visits by middle tier professionals, and several participants claimed that this could be as low as one or two visits per school per year.

To deal with these issues, middle tier professionals in this study **target visits to schools most in need and rely on technology (such as WhatsApp groups) to provide regular updates and communication between schools and subject advisors**. Participants suggested that subject advisors needed to be geographically and professionally closer to schools, especially those in need of additional support, and that circuits should be more capacitated to facilitate relationship building and networking of schools, community agencies and potential external support. It was noted that organizing schools into clusters with dedicated managers can facilitate collaboration, resource sharing, and mutual support among schools, however, this has shown to work better at the higher phases.

The **organisational structure of the middle tier** also impacts how instructional support is provided. School-based teachers have limited contact with middle tier officials and their departmental heads, and subject advisors are the main actors responsible for their capacity development, evaluation and support. Principals have slightly more contact with the middle tier, especially circuit managers and their staff, because circuit managers are responsible for the development, evaluation and support provided to the principals within their ambit. The limited individual and interpersonal contact that ordinary teachers have with subject advisors and other middle tier professionals means that teachers' main avenue for engagement and recourse is through principals or their union.

Given these constraints, participants noted that **the capacity injected by external support, such as programmes led by NGOs, can be helpful in addressing capacity limitations and providing follow-up support**. The schools in this study were receiving additional teacher and curriculum support provided by such a programme, and participants indicated that this complemented rather than fully replaced the professional development offered by the middle tier which has several limitations. One participant suggested that because of the large size of departmental workshops (planned through provincial or district levels and sometimes numbering 200 attendees), facilitators also could not guarantee coverage of all

important topics in depth or that they are relevant for all teachers attending. Moreover, a subject advisor in the study suggested that follow-up was also a challenge to these professional development opportunities.

## Middle tier practices

**Quality, length of training, follow up and monitoring influenced how effective middle tier led professional development opportunities were in fostering positive changes for teachers and school leaders**. Quality issues include the capacity and disposition of facilitators, the availability of learning resources, opportunities for reflection and discussion within training sessions, and the relevance of topics and content. Teachers mentioned attending sessions where the focus was either too generalist or too narrowly primed towards a specific grade or subject within phase-based sessions. Another issue that surfaced is that workshops and training events are regularly scheduled during school time, leaving learners to be monitored by volunteers or parents.

These issues are compounded by the **limited engagement teachers have with subject advisors responsible for their professional development**. Teachers considered the lack of subject advisor support to be particularly frustrating in no-fee schools, as this is often the main form of instructional support they receive outside of activities with principals or departmental heads.

Participants indicated the importance of instructional support being more localised, especially with schools challenged by limited resources for travel. Without this, subject advisors have fewer opportunities to catch issues before they encroach on teaching and learning quality. Several participants suggested that **subject advisors be circuit-, not district-based, though recognising this would require a significant injection of capacity at the circuit level**.

Teachers acknowledged the constraints that middle-tier professionals are challenged with. Teachers and middle tier professionals have developed **creative solutions to material and capacity challenges, such as WhatsApp groups and Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)**, however, they were not seen as an effective replacement for extended subject advisor time spent in schools.

Participants noted that **NGOs can offer complementary curriculum and teaching support to address capacity limitations within the middle tier; however, they have limited reach**. The findings showed that middle tier leaders do report on NGO activities to ensure alignment with national standards, but sustainability remains a challenge.

**Survey results show that teachers most frequently report that principals are their main source of support to help overcome challenges**. They serve as a key influence on teacher motivation and dedication, especially given the limited time that teachers have with subject advisors and other middle-tier professionals. This indicates that school leaders need to be well capacitated by the middle tier to ensure that they can provide strong, continuous support to teachers.

Principals were also found to be helpful in alleviating resource constraints, fundraising and partnering with NGOs on external programmes that provide support to teachers. However, because applications for external support can take place at the school level as well as through the efforts of middle-tier staff, the extent to which different provinces have comprehensive knowledge of all the actors involved and forms of support being accessed by different schools is dependent on the overall capacity and monitoring strength of the provincial government and its distribution of districts. **Greater middle tier leadership and oversight is essential to help principals manage external relationships and focus on their primary teaching and learning mandate**.

# Recommendations

Based on the literature review and findings from this study, a set of recommendations aimed at both policymakers and middle tier professionals is put forward.

## Support provided by the middle tier: Teaching & learning

Strengthen instructional leadership through a multi-faceted approach, developing strategies that prioritise resource allocation based on what works; align literacy and numeracy materials with policy changes; prioritise bilingual resource development by arranging for sustained engagement between teachers and language and teacher education institutions; arrange for workshops on bilingual teaching strategies in the circuits.

- Develop targeted support materials and related training to bridge the gap between Foundation and Intermediate Phases, to allow for learners to transition smoothly and improve learning continuity with limited adjustment challenges. This includes ensuring the district's understanding of learning gaps and their cumulative effects.

- Foster inter-school relationships for collaboration and sharing of resources to improve learning outcomes and stronger community support with reduced expenses.

- Ensure training delivered by middle tier professionals is based on evidence of what works including being relevant to the context, as close to school based as possible and includes follow up and monitoring.

## Support provided by the middle tier: Education planning and management

Support schools to formalise and manage donor funded programmes and relationships, such as developing common standards for agreements to achieve accountability and shared responsibility. It also should include oversight mechanisms that avoid undermining the local community.

- Empower principals with financial autonomy and training to effectively manage the funds and resources allocated to their schools. This would benefit from greater middle-tier steering and support for navigating sound financial management and adhering to departmental policies on procurement and personnel management.

- Implement more flexible and responsive funding access for no-fee schools so that they can club together to improve buying power, negotiate better prices and enable principals/school governing bodies to responsibly source funds at times outside of regulated schedule of quarterly fund release.

- Promote collaboration between school leaders and teachers through clusters to help address gaps in middle tier capacity.

- Encourage data-driven approaches to decision-making and analysing school performance.

- Define transparent accountability mechanisms and regularly undertake monitoring and evaluation.

- Promote equity in resource allocation and access to positions.

## Institutional enablers for an effective middle tier

- Improve professional development for middle tier roles such as subject advisors so they can be more effective in their role.

- Align policy priorities and incentives so that middle tier professionals focus on the policy priorities such as foundational learning.

- Consider how to provide more circuit-based instructional support and/or continue to harness technology so that the support is more localised and closer to the schools.

- Establish separate channels for engagement between teachers, unions and education departments for clearer communication, less room for negative political interference and reduced conflict.

- Introduce a research program, jointly developed by senior representatives from all nine education provinces, to explore the comparative dimension of Circuit and District processes, structures and relationships with a view to identifying examples of sustainable good practices for possible implementation across provinces.

# Future research

This study clearly illustrates **that contextual factors** – including political, socio-economic and geographic issues - can significantly influence the support provided to schools by the middle tier. For example, this study showed that political interference can influence middle tier capacity and functioning – such as teacher union influence on hiring individuals who might not be qualified for middle tier positions. This is an area where there is very little evidence and future research should seriously consider exploring how this and other contextual factors (cultural, historical, etc.) shape the institutional context and practices of the middle tier. As is the case in South Africa, it is important to acknowledge that national-level categorisations of schools (such as into wealth quintiles) can mask disparities at local levels. Therefore, it is critical to explore localised dimensions of inequality and other contextual factors.

While the **institutional factors** that surfaced in this study are not surprising, they are understudied and there is limited evidence to understand how they can best be addressed. A few areas relating to the institutional context for future research to consider include:

- How the structure of the middle tier – which roles exist at different levels of the system and where they are based geographically -- influences the access and quality of professional development for teachers and school's leaders.

- How the middle tier addresses gaps in their own resources and capacity – such as through technology and peer learning communities – and the limitations of these approaches.

- What policies and incentives are in place that might inadvertently drive middle-tier practices, such as the South African policy prioritisation of Grade 12.

In South Africa, future research could consider LGI and UNESCO IIEP's recent work on institutional barriers to leveraging the middle tier and the **use of a capacity assessment tool to better understand bottlenecks and opportunities within the education system**

In terms of **middle-tier practices to support schools**, this study found that both instructional leadership and management support are critical. Potential areas of inquiry for future study that surfaced in this work include:

- How the middle tier can ensure communication and alignment of priorities across different educational levels.

- Given the primary role school leaders play in teacher professional development, how the middle tier can strengthen support for school leaders.

- The role that the middle tier can play in facilitating school partnerships with external actors, including funders and NGOs.

- The role of the middle tier in supporting schools to establish additional and flexible funding mechanisms to help meet resource gaps.

Finally, there is a significant gap in understanding the barriers faced by women in the middle tier of education systems. This includes the challenges in developing a pipeline of female leaders, starting from the school level. **Further investigation of the impact of policies and practices to support female leaders at the middle tier should be undertaken, especially around existing approaches such as peer support networks**.

# 1 | Introduction

The contemporary global movement for education quality depends heavily on the capacity of education systems and their distinct sub-national governance arrangements to effectively translate and implement national policies within a range of contextual conditions. Over time, the strength of these middle-level operations within education governance has emerged as a critical lever in the effective delivery of curriculum and instructional and leadership support to schools in different circumstances. Middle-tier operations include the scope of managerial, professional and administrative support provided to ensure that system priorities are downloaded from national departments of education and regional governments by smaller regional or municipal arrangements of governing and operational authority, that are closer to schools on the ground. Coupled with the massification of public education in countries across the globe, systems have been tasked to manage, fund, resource, direct, introduce innovations, quality assure, monitor and govern the inputs and processes involved in supporting teaching and learning in schools. This has been most critical in national contexts where education has historically been a strategic lever of social exclusion and differentiation and has been subsequently reorganised to address equity and quality gaps.

South Africa is a key example of how tectonic shifts in political governance can influence the composition and practices of middle tier actors in the education system. The democratic transition of 1994 catalysed the dissolution of numerous race-based basic education administrations under apartheid, and their restructuring under one national Department of Education. This included defining the principles of a new institutional order and inducting a new generation of incumbents into a unified education administration that would include dedicated administrative and operational support provided to schools through more localised, geographically defined districts, as sub-levels of provincial education departments. In her account of the emergence of the new system from 2000, Narsee (2007) offers important insights into how this process involved challenging taken-for-granted professional attitudes, values and behaviours in the education system, alongside reconciling legacies of distrust, interference and disempowerment of teachers and school leaders in the past, with the new vision of democratic co-operative governance. This further included addressing gender and racial inequities in education management and leadership.

This research forms part of broader work being conducted by the Learning Generation Initiative to engage with how a stronger middle tier can positively influence education outcomes, including teaching and learning - a key evidence gap in current education policy research. The empirical data collected for this work builds on LGI's analytical framework, which situates middle-tier impact on education outcomes in two primary areas – instructional leadership and education management – and considers the institutional and organisational factors that influence how the middle tier fulfils these roles. Importantly, institutional and organisational factors are often mediated by contextual realities, including socio-historical, economic and political dynamics. These contextual dynamics are often not included in the existing research on the middle tier, and while they can be difficult to analyse, they are

crucial elements influencing how the middle tier operates and impacts education outcomes in diverse settings. Please refer to Section 3 for a full description of the framework and the elements that comprise each of these areas.

This report thus frames the middle tier as a pivotal enabling formation within education structures. The middle tier of South African provincial school systems – including officials at province, district and circuit level - has equally been caught up in the process of structural and political transition. It has been critical to balance equity and redress on one hand with ensuring sufficient capacity within an expanded public education system on the other. In the first decade of democracy, provincial governments were given significant latitude, within national standards, to determine the criteria for recruiting middle-tier personnel and structuring middle-tier operations. Over time, this resulted in qualification mismatches that undermined the legitimacy of middle-tier personnel in schools while also minimising the strength and relevance of the support that middle-tier structures could offer to teachers, schools and school leaders (De Clerq, 2002; Narsee, 2007).

In the two decades since, beginning with multi-year consultations with stakeholders across the system, national government has determined policy on the roles and responsibilities of provincial sub-levels in the system - school districts and circuits - and has also defined the maximum limits for determining district and circuit sizes. Further direction has also been provided on how professional development, monitoring, and curriculum support in schools is to be devolved through these middle tier levels. Clusters emerged as an additional sub-level used in more populated provinces to further disaggregate larger numbers of schools across available districts and circuits, creating smaller sub-units within densely constituted circuits. The effect has been the development of a comprehensive vision of education management that is undercut by demand, resource constraints, differences in policy interpretation and implementation, and socio-political factors - such as political and union contestations - that affect governance and service delivery to schools. In turn, the education management constraints experienced within the system have a knock-on effect on instructional leadership capacity, as officials at district and circuit levels regularly have to work across functions to maintain school functionality in under-resourced contexts especially.

From an initial period of transition and experimentation, the South African middle tier's role in providing instructional support has enjoyed a relatively short trajectory that - as we will observe - seems to have taken place under constrained financial and operational circumstances. The following research report provides an in-depth analysis of the state of the middle tier in a South African provincial context. A comprehensive review of the literature is presented in terms of the research problem, followed by a discussion of the study methodology and the findings of the report.

# 2 | Literature review and discussion of research on the middle tier

## 2.1 The 'middle tier' of education systems

An education system's largest investment and greatest lever for change is its workforce. While teachers and school leaders tend to be the representative figures of this workforce, in all education systems there are other actors who play a pivotal role in shaping the system's institutional context and performance. One such group, and the focus of this paper, is the 'middle tier' (Childress et al., 2020; The Education Commission, 2019; Tournier et al., 2023). The middle tier refers to the intermediate actors, structures and relationships within an education system that are situated between the school and central levels, performing various functions between the two.

The middle tier's exact configuration varies across countries, but its common mandate is to facilitate the coordination of education delivery and policy across system levels. Although there is no uniform global framework to classify middle-tier roles, the middle tier encompasses professionals across a range of areas including management, finance, human resources, and teaching and learning; they are often based in decentralised education offices, and work directly with schools (Childress et al., 2020; Tournier et al., 2023). Middle-tier administrators may have various designations depending on the system such as superintendent, circuit manager or principal supervisor. No matter their title, every education system has some type of above-school, sub-national administrative structure, and within this structure are actors with cross-school responsibilities. It is important to note that in many contexts, data on the middle tier is limited, making it difficult to understand the composition of the middle tier and what percentage incumbents in those roles make up of the entire education workforce. Although data is limited, research has shown that women tend to be under-represented in leadership positions in education, and this lack of data on the middle tier has contributed to the limited understanding of the barriers women face at this level of the system.

In practice, middle-tier professionals play a multifaceted role in driving implementation of policy and managing education delivery within their jurisdictions. While more evidence is needed to understand the full range of functions of the middle tier and their impact on education outcomes, existing research from high-income settings and emerging findings from low- and middle-income contexts broadly situate middle tier mandates across two main domains including 1) supporting teaching and learning and 2) management, with functions and associated roles and responsibilities that often are applicable across both domains (de Grauwe & Lugaz, 2010). Recent research from The Learning Generation Initiative (LGI) and the UNESCO International Institute for Education Planning (IIEP) has identified the core functions:

- Financial and material resource management

- Accountability and support

- Data collection and use

- Leading teaching and learning

- Human resource management

- Engaging the wider education community

The next section briefly summarises the existing evidence on how the middle tier has been shown to impact education outcomes through supporting teaching and learning, and education management.

# 2.2 Middle tier impact on education outcomes

## 2.2.1 Leading teaching and learning

Since teachers' work is the most powerful school-based influence on student learning (Chetty et al., 2014; Hanushek & Rivkin, 2010), many strategies for addressing the learning crisis focus heavily on the classroom level. While classroom teaching matters most, teachers and students alone do not create the conditions of their working relationship – the wider education workforce and the organisational context shapes their experience alongside the contextual dynamic of the classroom. The classroom does not exist in isolation, and mobilising support from the middle tier to improve what happens at schools is key to addressing the learning crisis at scale. There is some evidence to suggest that the middle tier can influence teaching and learning through instructional leadership, including providing professional development for teachers and school leaders, facilitating collaboration and peer learning at the school level, and providing data-driven guidance and prioritisation.

### Professional development for teachers and school leaders

Research has shown that successful professional development for teachers involves direct, individualised and practical support based in a school setting (Cilliers et al., 2018; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Evans and Popova's (2015) review identified pedagogical interventions and individualised long-term teacher training as key levers to improve teaching and learning in developing countries. Professional development and training is widely used to make goals, standards and methods of instruction better understood and implemented by teachers and principals, and the middle tier can play a coordinating and supportive role in such activities. Importantly, the positive effect on learning and its outcomes is found to be particularly evident if such training is supplemented through complementary follow-up measures. Research has also found that shorter training sessions for teachers over a longer duration are more effective than a single lecture or seminar (Boeskens et al., 2020; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Popova et al., 2021).

Evidence for the positive effect of middle-tier led teacher professional development combined with follow-up implementation monitoring can be seen from research in Ghana. After teachers received training in differentiated instruction methods (teaching students of different ability levels in the same class), middle-tier supervisors and principals used a simple implementation checklist to monitor the new instructional approach. Results of using the checklist showed teachers were 18% more likely to be in the classroom and 37 more likely to be engaged with students (Beg et al., 2019, 3).

Some research suggests that specific middle-tier roles for coaching and mentoring teachers and school leaders can be effective at changing classroom practice and improving learning outcomes. An at-scale example is the Wasichana Wote Wasome (Kiswahili for 'let all girls learn') programme in Kenya, which made extensive use of instructional coaches (Education Development Trust, n.d.). Coaches provided regular one-to-one school-based support to teachers in literacy and maths instruction, including tailored feedback and guidance. An external evaluation found that the programme shifted girls' reading outcomes by 0.52 standard deviations, providing over 90 000 girls with just under an additional year of learning compared to a control group (Coffey International, 2017).

## Facilitating collaboration and peer learning

Improved teacher and school collaboration has been a feature of several promising examples of school reform internationally. Professional learning communities and teacher resource groups are features of many school systems and typically exist to strengthen peer-to-peer learning within schools. The promotion of such collaborations is emerging as an important function for the middle tier. For example, citing a study across 45 districts in nine states in the United States of America (USA), Leithwood (2013) explains how well-developed networks created by districts to encourage collaborative professional learning accounted for 17% of the variation in student achievement across districts.

## Data-driven guidance and prioritisation

The use of data and evidence to support schools is another emerging area where the middle tier has been shown to impact teaching and learning. In higher-performing systems and rapidly improving systems, we see evidence that middle-tier roles are explicit in the use of data and evidence to underpin developmental conversations about instructional quality. This can include the use of school performance measures and student outcomes data.

The middle tier has also been shown to use data to set improvement priorities and provide feedback and practical recommendations for schools to change their day-to-day practices. For example, a study in Brazil, cited in the recent evidence report by Global School Leaders, has found that as part of a programme called Joven de Futuro, training provided for school and district leaders led to student test score increases of 0.12 and 0.09 standard deviations in mathematics and Portuguese, respectively (de Barros et al., 2021). The programme helps school and district leaders to align their goals and use data to drive their schools' improvement planning processes. Part of this work is the translation of school performance data by middle-tier professionals (MTPs) as they can help to make the data more meaningful for school leaders.

Important to note, quality instructional leadership through these various methods - professional development of teachers and school leaders, facilitating peer collaboration and using data-driven guidance - can only occur if the support in place is coherent and consistent across all the middle-tier structures nationally, and if middle-tier staff are properly trained and qualified themselves.

## 2.2.2 Middle-tier management

Leading teaching and learning through instructional leadership may serve as the function of the middle tier that most directly relates to improving learning outcomes. However, research has shown that the middle tier's administrative and managerial functions also play a key role in promoting education quality. Some of these functions often overlap with instructional leadership, and it can be difficult to distinguish them in practice.

Research over decades has highlighted the importance of education management at the middle tier level. Asim and colleagues (2023, 370), citing Ford et al. (2020), conclude that 'given their proximity to schools, subnational actors and organisations, including school districts, municipalities, and counties, [middle-tier actors] are mediators of school-level policy implementation and have the potential to bring about improvements in teaching and learning.' In an analysis of educational quality management practices, IIEP-Dakar argues that 'although actions that improve the quality of education take place in the classroom and in school, they are constantly influenced by decisions that are made outside of school, especially at the different levels of the education system. This raises the question of whether they are coordinated, coherent and oriented towards quality education' (IIEP-UNESCO Dakar, 2020, 9). Adelman and Lemos (2021, 1) have argued that 'student learning is unlikely to improve at scale without better management').

### Management practices

While the quantitative research is somewhat limited, there is some evidence suggesting a positive impact of different middle-tier management functions and practices on learning outcomes. For example, Cilliers & Habyarimana (2021) adapted and used the Development–World Management Survey (D-WMS) in Tanzania and observed that more frequent school visits by Education Wards (supervisors attached to district education offices) had a positive effect on pupil achievements. The increased frequency of school visits was combined with the introduction of performance reviews for the Education Wards and some locally administered school and teacher incentives to implement improved instructional approaches. Together, these changes were found to explain 10% of variation in the district's examination performances (Cilliers & Habyarimana, 2021). Similarly, Walter (2018) adapted the D-WMS to the context of Zambia and found that management practices of the district education office were positively correlated with national Grade 9 examination results. These practices fell across five dimensions including operations, monitoring, people, targets and leadership.

Providing differentiated and targeted support, including through resource allocation, is another area of management where the middle tier can impact school improvement and equity. Examples from the USA showed that strong districts realigned resources to help support schools that underperformed. This helped to 'close the achievement gaps by

ensuring that those students struggling the most have disproportionate access not only to financial support but also high-quality teachers, and successful peer models, all of which make a demonstrable contribution to student achievement' (Leithwood, 2013, 17).

**Management training**

Beg et al. (2019) conducted a randomised controlled trial (RCT) to specifically study the effect on student learning in Ghana of management training for circuit supervisors on a combination of best practices and found positive and significant effects of the intervention on student outcomes and management quality. The management training focused on instructional management (instructional planning processes, personalisation of instruction, data-driven planning and student transition and performance tracking) and people management (mentoring and improving the collaborative nature of relationships with teachers).

## 2.2.3 Institutional challenges to leveraging the middle tier

Although research illustrates the significant potential of the middle tier to impact education outcomes, we know that in many contexts middle-tier actors are not able to effectively undertake their functions. The middle tier's inability to create real impact is very often not a reflection of the competence or behaviours of individual officials, but a consequence of a set of enabling or inhibiting organisational and institutional factors in the environment in which they work; inhibiting factors include a lack of collaboration or coordination between teams, inadequate resources or a weak accountability system. Institutional and organisational challenges thus underlie many of the weaknesses seen across both instructional leadership and management responsibilities. LGI and IIEP have recently undertaken research building on the IIEP-OECD Capacity Assessment Framework which outlines key institutional factors affecting how the middle tier undertakes its functions and influences education outcomes. These factors are categorised under nine main areas or 'levers', each comprising several sub-elements, as outlined in Box 1. While there is some research pointing to positive examples of how countries have addressed some of the challenges related to these areas, there is still a lack of evidence regarding many of them, such as learning culture and cross-sector collaboration.

*Box 1: Nine capacity levers for analysing the middle tier*

1. Institutional and organisational fit or purpose

   - Contradictory or overlapping mandates, multiple lines of accountability, coordination and coherence across different middle tier structures and/or levels in the system

2. Clear roles and responsibilities

   - Clear priorities, standards, targets and vision, clear distribution of responsibilities, administrative tasks balance with other responsibilities

3. Staff competence and motivation

   - Sufficient staff numbers and continuity in post, job tenure, job satisfaction and well-being, transparent and fair recruitment, appropriate qualifications and professional development, career and performance incentives

4. Effective public financing

   - Sufficient funding and resources, authority over resource distribution, financial control determining relationships with schools

5. Learning culture

   - Opportunities for knowledge sharing, collaborative learning and targeted support, such as through coaching and mentoring

6. Comprehensive school improvement

   - Comprehensive plan and mechanisms for school improvement support

7. Effective data and research use

   - Access to timely and quality data, knowledge and skills to analyse and use data for decision making to develop a culture of systematic use of data and research

8. Stakeholder engagement

   - Coordination and communication with both education and non-education

9. Cross-sector collaboration.

   - Coordination and communication with other sectors, especially for inclusion and well-being

Importantly, institutional and organisational factors are often driven by contextual realities, including socio-historical, economic and political considerations. These factors are rarely

included in the existing research on the middle tier, and while they can be difficult to analyse, they are crucial elements influencing how the middle tier operates and impacts education outcomes.

## 2.3 Research gaps

In low- and middle-income contexts, there is limited evidence on how the middle tier impacts education outcomes through both instructional leadership and management functions. In terms of leading teaching and learning, there are specific gaps around the role of the middle tier in supporting collaborative teacher professional development like peer learning communities (PLCs) and the use of data to inform instructional leadership. The evidence on education management practices in low- and middle-income communities (LMICs) is nascent, and there are few examples of effective training and professional development for middle tier professionals.

Finally, there is limited understanding of the institutional challenges and contextual realities interacting with them which keep the middle tier from supporting schools. There is also limited evidence on promising practices for how to address these. In general, in most countries, there is very little data available on the middle tier available, making it difficult to even get a basic understanding of who makes up the middle tier. Importantly, this has contributed to the limited understanding of the barriers women in particular face entering and serving in middle-tier leadership positions. This research seeks to help address these specific gaps by providing new evidence and insight from the South African education system.

# 3 | South Africa's educational context and the middle tier role

## 3.1 Introduction

South Africa has a semi-federal governance system where provinces and their elected provincial governments are responsible for the implementation of national policy. The 2013 Policy on the Organisation, Roles and Responsibilities of Education Districts (Department of Basic Education (DBE), 2013) argues that effective districts can improve the quality of schooling for learners by providing a common approach for the coordination of functions between national and provincial departments, to ensure coherence in the downloading of responsibilities to the middle-tier sublevels – districts and circuits – responsible for interfacing with schools. Moreover, this policy highlights the critical role of district officers in creating equitable, quality education across schools, which aligns with growing evidence pointing to the critical role that middle-tier leaders can play as instructional leaders for teachers and school leaders, particularly in under-resourced areas (Childress et al., 2020; Mc Lennan et al., 2018). It is useful to hold middle-tier as a system designation, while recognising that these professionals also have highly localised knowledge and experiences that shape their professional actions across the approximately 80 districts (DBE, 2018[1]) in the country's nine provinces.

The policy on district roles and responsibilities also aims to address the learning inequalities the system faces by leveraging South Africa's middle tier, comprising district and circuit officials, to serve as a critical link between the nationally-set Department of Education (DBE) policies and their implementation at the school level. Within each province are district officials (management, administrative, specialist staff) who serve as the primary interface between the provincial heads and schools. Subject advisors are also deployed from district or provincial level, and so are also viewed as middle-tier professionals in this study. Each district is further sub-divided into circuits, led by circuit managers. Altogether, these middle-tier officers carry out a multitude of responsibilities which include curriculum support, educational improvement and administrative tasks, all of which are pivotal to enhancing education quality. The curriculum support function is also highlighted in the national policy.

> *Subject to provincial plans, [district officers']…task is to work collaboratively with principals and educators in schools, with the vital assistance of circuit offices, to improve educational access and retention, give management and professional support, and to help schools achieve excellence in learning and teaching. (DBE, 2013, 14).*

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1 The Department of Basic Education periodically consolidates Education Statistics reports for a designated year. The latest release uses 2016 data and was released in 2018. While other sources may offer updated information on e.g. learner and teacher numbers, the designated number of districts in individual provinces tends to remain stable over time.

National government, including the DBE, sets policy, defines norms and standards and allocates resources to provinces based on proportional need. Provincial governments have the authority to use and direct these resources to oversee effective education implementation within their boundaries, and within the ambit of national policy provisions. This includes hiring teachers, defining district and circuit boundaries, and delegating specific responsibilities to district offices. Provinces differ in number of education districts, with more densely populated and/or geographically dispersed provinces having higher numbers of districts (these include the Western Cape, Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal) (DBE, 2018). Another way that large concentrations of schools have been disaggregated is through clusters, which further divide circuits into more manageable operational units.

Subject advisors are deployed at provincial and district levels and are accountable to the Heads of Curriculum Support at both levels. The main work of circuits is as 'field offices' for district support, thus overseeing local implementation and designated administrative and professional support and monitoring functions (DBE, 2013). Circuit managers are essential for guiding local stakeholders to effectively manage and govern schools at the day-to-day level. They play a critical role in implementing educational policies across the designated phases within the basic education curriculum, including General Education and Training (GET), Further Education and Training (FET) and Early Childhood Development (ECD). Table 1 summarises the within-phase grade progression in the basic education curriculum, the Curriculum & Assessment Policy Statements (CAPS).

| Foundation Phase | Intermediate Phase | Senior Phase | Nat. Senior Certificate Phase |
|---|---|---|---|
| *Grades R to 3* **Core subjects** - Home Language - First Additional Language - Mathematics - Life Skills | *Grades 4 to 6* **Core subjects** - Home Language - First Additional Language - Mathematics - Natural Sciences & Technology - Social Sciences - Life Skills | *Grades 7 to 9* **Core subjects** - Home Language - First Additional Language - Mathematics - Natural Sciences - Social Sciences - Technology - Economic Management Sciences - Life Orientation - Creative Arts | *Grades 10 to 12* **Core subjects** - Home Language - First Additional Language - Mathematics OR Mathematical Literacy - Life Orientation<br><br>Learners offer a minimum of THREE specialist subjects in content areas including Economic & Management Studies, Social Sciences, Physical & Life Sciences, Design/Performing/Creative Arts, Information Technology and Robotics, and others.<br><br>*Subject offering is dependent on school capacity.* |

***Table 1: South African subject and grade breakdown by education phase***

The content load gradually increases for learners up to Senior Phase to provide a comprehensive basic education, from which learners are able to choose from a range of specialised subjects at a more sophisticated level in the FET Phase, which terminates with the Grade 12 National Senior Certificate examination.

Subject advisors' and circuit managers' work coincides in the provision of curriculum support and subject expertise to enhance teaching and learning outcomes, specifically for struggling schools (DBE 2013). Subject advisors are expected to be content and phase specialists that work with designated groups of teachers, while circuit managers oversee the professional development of principals, and communicate news and opportunities for curriculum and teacher development from within government agencies. Circuit managers are also tasked with ensuring schools are held accountable while promoting improvements in student performance, facilitating inclusive education and addressing learning barriers. They are engaged in strategic planning, staff development and building strong partnerships between parents and school staff (Mthembu, 2014). While not always the case, many circuit managers are former school leaders themselves who have the advantage of knowing what might be lacking on the ground and what additional capacity might be needed to enhance leadership performance (Mthembu, 2014). Figure 1 summarises the main responsibilities of middle-tier actors in the South African system.

**District officials**

*Headed by District Director.*
*Responsible for planning, monitoring and evaluation, resourcing and management, teacher personnel management, curriculum and ICT support, inclusive education, development of middle-tier staff capacity, stakeholder relations and school governance support.*

**Subject Advisors**

*Deployed from provincial and/or district levels and reporting to Heads of Curriculum at either level.*
*Responsible for curriculum, teaching and learning development training for teachers and schools, supporting monitoring of learning outcomes and analysing towards improvement, identifying teachers, phases or grades in need of additional support, collaborating with other colleagues towards learning improvement.*

**Circuit officials**

*Headed by circuit manager.*
*Circuit managers are responsible for overseeing the day-to-day operational and managerial needs of schools, monitoring and evaluation (including evaluating school principals), dealing with administrative, disciplinary or localised challenges, providing information and professional development opportunities, as well as providing resources and space for the activities of PLCs and other teacher groups.*

*Figure 1: Main responsibilities of middle tier actors in South Africa*

The national policy defining the work of circuits and districts also makes special mention of circuit managers' responsibility towards supporting Grade R and Foundation Phase teaching and learning, as well as facilitating district support and moderation visits in high schools (DBE, 2013). The policy also provides for additional posts to be allocated to districts that service a majority of poor schools as well as those working across large distances. In practice, the filling of these posts forms part of current capacity challenges in the system.

Table 2 presents the DBE's own summary of the key priorities of districts and their sublevels, including circuits, as reported on the national portal. These priorities frame the responsibilities of districts and circuits, as well as the activities of subject advisors in schools.

| Responsibility | Instructional Leadership | Priorities | | | Education Management |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Planning | | Collection and analysis of school, cluster/ circuit/ district data for effective planning | Supporting the use and completion of school improvement and development plans | Synthesising individual school planning into cluster/ circuit/ district strategic planning, including calendar alignment | |
| Support | | Creating an enabling environment and offering dedicated support to schools and education institutions within district ambit | Supporting improvements in teaching and learning through visits, feedback, consultations etc; as well as supporting the CPD of managers, administrators and principals. | Serving as a point of contact and information on education policy, news and opportunities, as well as facilitating ict access | |
| Oversight & accountability | | Ensuring principals are accountable for school performance | Accounting for the performance of institutions within the cluster/ circuit/ district, to the ped | Accounting for performance, responsibilities and deployment of middle-tier staff | |
| Public engagement | | Keeping the public informed | Consulting with the public incl. Individual school communities | Upholding the principles of 'people first' (batho pele) | |

*Table 2: Middle-tier and cross-cutting priorities in the system*

The middle tier's role in South Africa is deeply intertwined with the country's historical, political and socio-economic context, such that the new vision for education governance is constantly in friction with efforts to define the role of the middle tier across the diverse range

of sub-provincial contexts that middle-tier professionals might work in. National policy in the democratic period has had to grapple with the very real effects of apartheid spatial and social planning on the material realities of South Africa's schools. These realities include ageing infrastructure; lack of sufficient classrooms, sports facilities or recreational spaces; community poverty, unemployment or crime; distance from further economic and learning opportunities; and weak public service infrastructure, including the availability of clinics and police stations (Bantwini, 2014, 48; Makhalemele & Nel, 2015; Ncwane, 2019; Nhlumayo, 2020; Nkambule, 2018). These effects were planned outcomes of apartheid policy, intended to map material inequality over the hierarchical segregation of 'race' groups (Soudien, 2012).

The empirical data in this study supports findings in previous research that these historical drivers of inequality rub up against contemporary efforts to foster equity through different public sector levers (Cooper, 2023; de Gruijters et al 2022; Rogan & Reynolds 2016; Sayed & Ahmed 2008). This is because these inequalities are historic and layered, affecting and cutting across different spheres of public sector planning and impact. At the same time, instructional leadership and education management appear to be key priorities in the system and in the way that the work of middle-tier professionals is framed. These priorities cut across the work of middle-tier professionals and the support and oversight they provide to schools, and the information they provide to the system about schools. At the level of instructional leadership, middle-tier professionals in South Africa are the closest government sources of curriculum, planning and developmental support to schools, and work with school leaders and subject teachers to find ways to strengthen teaching and learning. Moreover, principals are expected to serve as the instructional heads of their schools, and so it is integral that the support that middle-tier professionals provide to school leaders synthesises this aspect with the institutional requirements of their roles as education managers at the most localised level (i.e. the individual school).

## 3.2 Education policy context underpinning middle-tier professionals

The National Education Policy Act, No. 27 of 1996 is the major governing framework that provides for a single, coordinated basic education system in South Africa, consolidating the 19 apartheid-era education departments into one national Department of Education (which later split into the Department of Basic Education and the Department of Higher Education and Training). The National Education Policy Act provides for the 'policy, legislative and monitoring responsibilities' (Sayed & Ahmed, 2008, 5) of the national Minister as well as for the coordination of activities between national government and provincial education departments.

Flowing from this framework is the South African Schools Act, No. 84 of 1996 and its subsequent amendments, which defines the status, purpose and powers of schools, staff, parents, school governing bodies and government offices in relation to the execution of teaching and learning in public institutions. Sayed and Ahmed (2008) argue that the South African Schools Acts a key vehicle of administrative downloading in the public education system.

In terms of the policy, education districts fall within the governing authority of Provincial Education Departments (PEDs); they do not have powers of their own, but are delegated specific responsibilities, functions and authority in line with relevant national and provincial policy (DBE, 2013). The post establishment of education districts and circuits is determined by each province's education minister in line with their national budgetary allocation.
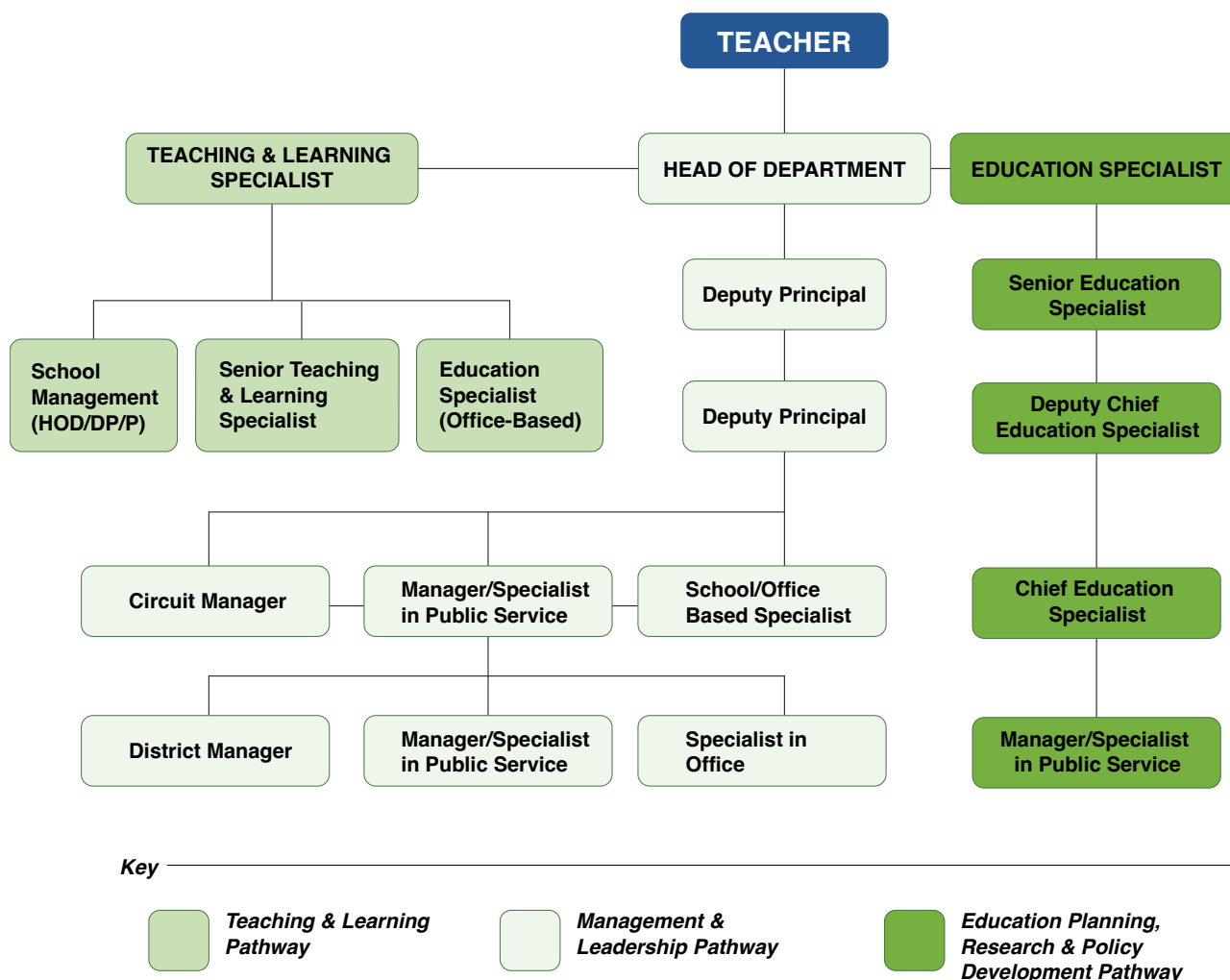


*Figure 2: Teacher career pathways in the South African education system (Sayed & De Kock 2019a)*

Figure 2 indicates the three education career pathways available in the public sector in South Africa for holders of basic teaching degrees: teaching and learning; management and leadership; and education planning, research and policy development. The employment levels are also intended to allow for lateral movement across pathways based on equivalence in post levels and their qualification designations, such as from principal to deputy chief education specialist. The teaching and learning pathway is geared towards teachers intending to stay within school settings, especially those looking to remain in the classroom. However, past application of this pathway has been limited by resource constraints, including at provincial level (Sayed & de Kock, 2019a), due to the importance of staffing the management and education planning pathways. The management and leadership pathway provides for movement into school leadership as well as out of school-based work towards circuit or district leadership. This pathway also allows for school leaders to progress into

specialist posts which include subject area, phase or other curriculum-based specialisations (e.g. inclusive education). Lastly, the education planning and policy development pathway allows for teaching staff to enter the education planning and governance space, whether as education specialists and senior or deputy chief education specialists (which includes subject advisors and circuit staff). The management and education planning pathways are the main modes of entry for circuit and district staff (including subject advisors) given their function as management- and office-based education specialists (Sayed & de Kock, 2019a, 2019b; Mbokazi et al., 2022). School-based experience is a prerequisite for entry into office-based work, alongside other statutory requirements.

The three education career pathways also splinter off based on provincial post establishments, which follow national norms but are modified based on provincial structure and governance capacity. In this way, for example, some provinces have introduced clusters as an additional sub-level below circuits in the local governance of schools. Findings from the empirical data suggest that circuit managers and subject advisors have been jointly responsible for overseeing clusters as sub-units of circuit-school relations, with circuit managers driving the operational aspect of clusters and subject advisors using the cluster model as a way to simplify some of the complexities around planning and support. Subject advisors are also able to connect teachers and departmental heads within schools to drive their own professional development, and foster more sustainable connections between closely connected schools that would otherwise be harder to identify and mobilise within the administration of the circuit. While the workload for the middle tier may not significantly reduce without the injection of additional posts, the cluster model allows for closer localisation of operational oversight and instructional support, bridging the distance that would emerge from using the circuit as the primary point of contact for a large number of schools – more than the maximum of 30 as designated in national policy

The organogram (Figure 2) demonstrates an equivalence between circuit managers and chief education specialists, though it must be observed that circuit manager posts actually can begin from the deputy chief education specialist level under certain circumstances (Education Labour Relations Council [ELRC], 2022; Mbokazi et al., 2022). Mbokazi et al. (2022) suggest that teaching experience features significantly in decision-making about promotion to office-based posts, perhaps more so than formal qualifications. Given South Africa's uneven legacy of teacher education preparation, this emphasis on experience may be a means of ensuring equity is considered in determining a candidate's suitability for promotion; however, it also means that in some cases, office-based specialists may not be hired with the requisite balance of skills and practical knowledge, meaning that circuit staff and subject advisors may not have the necessary level of expertise to service schools and teachers effectively.

Circuit managers are required to have the basic four-year degree or equivalent qualification alongside 12 years of educational experience, including three years of managerial experience (ELRC, 2008). As departmental heads are equivalent to office-based education specialists, subject advisors are a rank above senior education specialists, equivalent at minimum to deputy principal level. Senior education specialists require a basic four-year degree or

equivalent coupled with eight years of educational experience. Managerial experience is not required but is likely advantageous, meaning that some circuit- or district-level officials do not have school leadership experience but progress into middle-tier leadership based on in-position professional development and/or performance.

This background underscores the pressures that middle-tier professionals in South Africa face in supporting effective teaching and learning through retaining good teachers and supporting them to do their work effectively. This context also filters into the experiences and perspectives of middle-tier professionals in the education system, given that most of them enter the management and education policy pathways from school-based employment. As such, middle-tier professionals in South Africa are well placed to speak to system-level issues, including: the effect of national policy on determining resourcing norms and standards for a diverse array of public schools (Ncwane, 2019; Nhlumayo, 2020); the effect of policy and politics on hiring and filling posts in schools and local governance structures (Hatch et al., 2017; Mbokazi et al., 2022); and the role of other, powerful stakeholders such as unions, parents, and local communities in both agenda-setting and contestation in the education system (Jacobs, 2024; Sibanda, 2021; Wills, 2020). The following section presents a selection of research and doctoral-level theses on specific dynamics affecting middle-tier support in impoverished and rural schools, as well as at specific levels of support in the system (e.g., between circuit and schools, between district and schools). While the inclusion of doctoral research data may be outside the traditional range of sources used in a literature review, we argue that it is important to consider novel research being conducted at South African universities where this work speaks to the research problem and emerges from its context. Other peer-reviewed works are used in support of doctoral research where necessary.

## 3.3 Research on the impact and quality of South African middle-tier support

As this discussion has highlighted, the middle tier in the South African education system is associated with a variety of institutional, administrative and political meanings. For the majority of historically disadvantaged schools, the middle tier formed part of the apartheid state's inspectorate and monitoring functions, fostering a culture of fear and distrust between teachers, school communities and government involvement in school management.

South African schools are divided into wealth quintiles, with quintiles 1-3 representing the 'most poor' schools with designated no-fee status. No-fee schools are granted additional funds for operational costs to account for lack of fee income, though this does not, in practice, bridge the material and infrastructural gaps encountered in these schools (de Gruijters et al., 2022; Marishane, 2013). Moreover, part of the allocation to no-fee schools is held in trust by the provincial government as an indirect allocation, meaning that schools have to apply to use remaining funds (causing delays if funds are required for emergencies or specific events). Schools in quintiles 4 and 5 receive general school funding – that is, a direct allocation – and top this up with fee income, which can significantly increase the schools' available pool of resources. However, research has noted the large numbers of impoverished learners

attending some quintile 4 and 5 schools as well as the tendency towards non-payment of fees by struggling parents in these schools, despite government provision for school fee exemption for needy families (Hatch et al., 2017; Lewis & Naidoo, 2004; Marishane 2013;). This suggests that the problem of school poverty and under-resourcing extends beyond the designated 'most poor' quintiles.

Circuit and district structures have been defined by national government as a critical lever in developing capacity and providing curriculum and instructional support within struggling schools, particularly in light of these resource constraints. This includes providing specialist support to school leaders including principals and departmental heads; providing curriculum and instructional guidance to strengthen teaching and learning; and supporting goal setting, monitoring and improvement by education professionals and schools (Bantwini, 2018; DBE, 2013; Makhalemele & Nel 2015). Alongside the overarching policy on the roles and responsibilities of districts, the DBE has also developed action plans and strategic documents to support specific dimensions of school- and middle-tier-based supports. These include the Strategy to Improve School Management & Governance in Schools (DBE, 2018), a guideline document provided to principals and school management teams to articulate the working relations between school staff, parents and the community, districts and other governance structures, and alignment to national school governance policy.

### 3.3.1 Support to teachers and school leaders

Some studies suggest that effective district support involves regular school visits and contact with school leaders so that officials can directly engage in discussions with school management teams (SMTs) about curriculum implementation, challenges faced by teachers, and strategies to overcome these challenges (Mafuwane & Pitsoe, 2014; Ndlovu, 2017). An analysis based on data from South Africa School Monitoring Survey (SMS), which monitors progress on national education goals, revealed a significant increase in the frequency of district visits since 2011, with 95% of all schools receiving at least two visits a year (Deliwe & Seabe, 2022). However, the study also uncovered disparities in the duration of district officers' visits, with wealthier urban secondary schools more likely to receive visits compared to primary schools and those in rural areas. Importantly, the study also revealed that visits focused on instructional support (i.e., teacher development or curriculum guidance) were more effective in positively influencing learning outcomes than visits primarily focused on policy compliance. While school leaders generally expressed high levels of satisfaction with these visits, this satisfaction was notably higher for targeted visits which were focused on practical support than visits that focused more on bureaucratic tasks (Deliwe & Seabe, 2022).

Bantwini and Moorosi's (2018) study of 34 school principals, district and circuit officials and the provincial director in the Eastern Cape found that subject advisors and some circuit managers lacked the necessary skills or experience to serve effectively as instructional leaders and support struggling schools. At the time of the study, circuits in the province existed as 'virtual entities' in the sense that they were housed within the main district office and did not have separate in-field locations. This created a distinct challenge for circuit staff based at the district office and travelling large distances to service their designated areas (Bantwini & Moorosi, 2018). At the same time, circuit managers struggled to

enforce their monitoring and evaluation authority over schools with tight union alliances, hampering their ability to manage poor performance in schools or by specific teachers (Bantwini & Moorosi, 2018).

Research suggests that establishing regular communication channels across all levels of the education system can help address inconsistencies and misunderstandings and align standards and measures of success. Research in South Africa has shown that school leaders often have differing approaches and visions for improving teaching and learning compared to district personnel. This disconnect can lead to frustration, particularly among school leaders. However, in one successful case, a district implemented procedures that improved communication and fostered mutual understanding between the district office and school leaders regarding instructional goals and approaches (Mc Lennan et al., 2018).

One small qualitative study suggested that using data for both support and accountability proved successful in influencing positive instructional leadership. Training school leaders on how to properly use and interpret this data was vital for ensuring its effective application (Mthembu, 2018).

> **Box 2: The Jika iMfundo programme**
>
> As an attempt to support schools in the KZN province with improving learning outcomes, PILO, a collaborative initiative was implemented in 2013. PILO is a not-for-profit organisation with a focus on supporting schools in South Africa to improve learning outcomes. Unions and the KZN DoE collaborated for a year to design the Jika iMfundo programme, implemented as a pilot and expanded until all KZN districts are now participating in the programme. The programme's focus is on improving teacher practice through curriculum planning, tracking and sequencing. The programme includes School Management Team training with nine training modules focused on effective school governance and management practices for effective, collaborative management. There is also leadership support provided to district and circuit officials to ensure that they are able to provide all the schools within their jurisdiction with sufficient support.

One positive example of strong middle-tier support is the Jika iMfundo programme in the KwaZulu-Natal province which illustrates how district and circuit managers can provide valuable, evidence-driven curriculum support to schools. The programme emphasises 'constructive professional conversations' between district officials, school leaders and teachers based on evidence and revolves around improving curriculum coverage and learning outcomes. The programme's approach involves capacity-building workshops and coaching for circuit managers, enabling them to lead curriculum management effectively within their circuits. This type of support fosters a collaborative environment where school leaders and teachers feel more confident in their roles and more capable of addressing curriculum challenges (Mc Lennan et al, 2018). The programme's focus on curriculum management is reinforced by tools like the Circuit Managers' Tool, which helps district

officials monitor curriculum coverage in a structured way. This tool provides a basis for professional conversations that are centred on evidence, allowing circuit managers to give targeted feedback and support to schools (Mc Lennan et al., 2018). Box 2 provides more details on the Jika IMfundo programme.

## Teacher professional development and peer collaboration

In 2011, the DBE and the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) launched the Integrated Strategic Planning Framework for Teacher Education and Development in South Africa, 2011–2025 (ISPFTED). The framework includes the establishment of district teacher development centres (DTDCs) which would house professional learning communities (PLCs) for teachers. Each province is responsible for the initiation and support of PLCs through these centres, and districts are meant to provide resources and expertise, translate issues from the province and the national levels to the school level, encourage peer collaboration amongst teachers, and provide annual progress reports on the implementation of PLCs to their provincial offices (Lamkin, 2006).

However, in practice these centres have fallen short of their intended goal. A study from the KwaZulu-Natal province found that many stakeholders did not use the centres adequately (Ajibade & Bertram, 2020). Moreover, instead of offering a range of professional development activities that could help teachers acquire new skills and knowledge, the centres instead tended to focus more on ensuring compliance with provincial policies such as moderating assessments or setting examination papers. Interviewed teachers saw these centres as being more for administrative purposes than for learning opportunities. Despite many centres having libraries and science and computer laboratories, they were often underutilised because of outdated materials or a lack of trained teaching professionals to lead training. Yet some teachers did find value in having access to these centres, with some interviewees citing those collaborative activities improved their teaching practices, particularly helping with subject-specific challenges (Ajibade & Bertram, 2020).

## Instructional and pastoral leadership

District-level instructional support provides the first layer of strategic direction to schools, teachers and school leaders in their implementation of the national curriculum, through both curriculum support and the work of subject advisors and through dedicated professional development for departmental heads and school principals which strengthens their capacity to lead teaching and learning in their schools. Circuits further operationalise this support by providing targeted interventions to designated phases or school types, monitoring school and circuit performance, and working with schools to develop improvements for specific areas. However, the depth of support that circuits can offer is also affected by dynamics outside their control such as whether vacant office-based posts are filled (thus resolving middle-tier personnel shortages), whether learner migration affects the number of teaching posts allocated to the schools under their administration or whether circuit offices are actually physically located within the micro-regions they service (Chuta, 2018; Mashau et al., 2008; Zengele, 2013).

Myende & Maifala's (2020) study of six circuit managers in KwaZulu-Natal found that what they call leadership for learning occurs in the context of multiple deprivations in South Africa, which influence how circuit managers plan, prioritise and mobilise specific forms of support. Circuit managers have critical support and monitoring functions but what they do is decided at the provincial level and does not necessarily reflect contextual needs. In spite of this limitation, study participants shared reflections that suggested local-level interactions could escalate to national crises without effective management on the ground. Effective management would include having bilateral engagements with teacher unions, mediating alternatives to strike action, and creating spaces for stakeholder groups to deliberate on important matters (Myende & Maifala, 2020).

The form these stakeholder groups take varies in practice and can include the local police, community elders, traditional leaders, businesses and parents. As a wider support network for local schools, many of them impoverished, these stakeholder groups and their engagements form a protective network that can be mobilised against context-specific challenges that compromise teaching and learning, including crime and gangsterism, learner discipline and managing attendance at extra classes or academic commitments. Managing this network forms part of the instructional leadership work of circuit managers and enables them to leverage relationships where resources are lacking in order to support continued teaching and learning in the schools under their administration. However, while drawing on these relationships to address specific issues and minimise their impact on schools' operations, the goal setting and stakeholder approach taken disperses leadership authority to other stakeholders (e.g., the local police) by bringing them into key decision-making and planning fora (Myende et al., 2020).

A 2023) study by Alsofrom et al. of external coaches, subject advisors and departmental heads involved in the wider Early Grade Reading Project defines subject advisors and departmental heads as critical instructional leaders in the system. The authors indicate that an embedded expectation of these roles includes coaching and mentoring teachers to improve their practice, but that in reality this support is usually provided by external coaches at a high cost that is exclusionary to most schools (Alsofrom et al., 2023).

As coaches, subject advisors and departmental heads act as 'critical friends' to teachers and support them to reflect on and develop their practice, harmonising accountability with support. The aim of coaching is to enable teachers to identify gaps or areas of improvement in their practice and to support them as they trial solutions, reflect on effects and modify their approach. This requires long-term, regular and consistent engagement, which is limited by the availability of sufficient subject advisors in the system. This also has a downward effect on effectively capacitating departmental heads to provide internal instructional support (Alsofrom et al., 2023).

Moreover, while subject advisors are expected to make regular visits to schools, the regularity and scope of these visits is not defined in policy and may differ based on factors such as school distance, time available for visits and individual relationships with school staff. Schools and teachers may also request subject advisors' input on matters such as career guidance (Myende & Maifala, 2020) or to arrange workshops on specific curriculum

or policy issues (Alsofrom et al., 2023). Again, this capacity varies hugely both within districts and across provinces. Spaull and Taylor (2022) calculated the ratio of Foundation Phase mathematics and English first additional language (EFAL) teachers to subject advisors by province, finding that the average subject advisor-to-teacher ratio in the Western Cape was 1:225, compared to an average of 1:1 547 (one subject advisor per 1 547 Maths and EFAL teachers) in KwaZulu-Natal. These ratios are unfavourable for regular and dedicated visits by subject advisors to the schools they service. Moreover, this frames the challenge of establishing a rigorous coaching/instructional development programme for teachers led by subject advisors and departmental heads given that the average coach-to-teacher ratio in effective teacher development programmes is around 1:30 (Spaull 2023, cited in Also from et al., 2023). System-wide efforts to fund and fill subject advisor and circuit-level posts should form part of a wider strategy to develop the middle-tier as the instructional core of education administration as the slow pace of filling vacant posts adds to the practical limitations experienced by subject advisors and circuit managers in providing effective support to schools. Alsofrom et al. (2023, 21) thus argue that 'The main challenges to getting [subject advisors] into schools do not seem to be issues of motivation, but rather issues of concrete numbers (of people, cars)'. This is further discussed in the institutional challenges section.

### 3.3.2 Accountability and monitoring

The accountability role of middle-tier leaders is another critical aspect of their function in the South African education system. District officials are tasked with monitoring schools' adherence to national curriculum standards and holding school leaders accountable for educational outcomes, which includes ensuring that schools meet their curriculum coverage targets, maintain proper records, and implement school improvement plans effectively (Mc Lennan et al., 2018).

The monitoring and evaluation component of circuit offices oversees the whole-school evaluation and teacher performance/development appraisal components of the Quality Management System (QMS) currently in place for schools and school-based educators. Circuit managers are responsible for managing these processes at the schools under their administration as well as conducting the performance appraisals of those school principals. They also oversee the collation of this information and feeding it up to district level (DBE, 2013; Makhalemele & Nel 2015; Myende & Maifala, 2020).

Districts often face the dual challenge of enforcing accountability while also providing support. The tension between these responsibilities can sometimes lead to a compliance-driven approach, where the focus shifts from supporting educational improvement to simply meeting bureaucratic requirements. This compliance culture can undermine professional judgement and reduce the effectiveness of district support (Mc Lennan et al., 2018). To address this, programmes like Jika iMfundo advocate for a shift towards professional accountability, where the emphasis is on using data and evidence to inform decision-making and support schools in a more meaningful way. This approach aims to balance the need for accountability with the need for support, fostering a more developmental relationship between district officials and school leaders (Mc Lennan et al., 2018).

Alsofrom et al. (2023) further suggest that this duality may affect the work of subject advisors, particularly in balancing their monitoring of curriculum compliance with the need to provide general and individualised coaching and support to teachers. Monitoring of teacher activities forms a key component of subject advisors' work and includes reviewing learner portfolios, lesson plans and assessments; observing lessons; and providing support to schools identified for further enrichment (Chikoko et al., 2014). Because many subject advisors do not have the time to observe all classes at a school during a visit, they may pre-select classes based on performance data, guidance provided by the departmental heads or grade order, increasing the likelihood of missing teachers in need of instructional support (Alsofrom et al., 2023). This also means that subject advisors spend limited individual time with teachers, unless other factors support the development of a professional relationship, feeding a general sense of bureaucratic distance between teachers and middle-tier support structures.

### 3.3.3 Institutional challenges

**Clarity of priorities and responsibilities**

Despite the evidence on the middle tier's ability to enhance teaching and learning, research indicates that there is often insufficient support in this regard, with several studies highlighting that district officers frequently focus more on administrative duties, such as monitoring policy compliance and resource provision, than meaningful support and guidance on the curriculum. As a result, school leaders across several studies cited a disconnect between the middle tier and the schools in which they serve (Bantwini & Moorosi, 2018; Bhengu et al., 2014; Mavuso, 2013). Additionally, some school leaders in these studies indicated that the middle tier could not provide professional support because they did not understand their schools' curriculum needs (Mthembu, 2014).

Studies also highlight a lack of coherence in the perceived roles and responsibilities of middle-tier officials, causing tension and frustration for circuit managers. One example of how this has been addressed is the Jika iMfundo programme, which held training that outlined a 'roadmap' of each stakeholder's responsibility for their role in supporting individual school's improvement plans. In a study on the programme, one district official stated, 'Once the role of the SMT became clearer in relation to our role in the district, it allowed us to develop a common language and work around a common purpose. I think this also built mutual accountability between ourselves and the schools' (Witten & Makole, 2015, 12).

Definitional clarity supports more effective use of resources and strengthens stakeholder accountability in the system. Alsofrom et al. (2023) found that subject advisors in their study provided a variety of definitions of their main job responsibilities, from some emphasising monitoring and compliance to others highlighting their role in the provision of school support and cultivation of stakeholder relations. This variation indicates that subject advisors may also emphasise specific duties or strategic areas over others based on their interpretation of their job descriptions, which is also a result of how this was communicated and cascaded from the provincial and district levels.

## Resourcing and staffing

Despite the different policy attempts to streamline roles and responsibilities across districts, the actual delegation of tasks still remains with the provincial heads of departments, which oftentimes leads to great variation in capacity and competency across districts. Financial and human resource constraints also exacerbate these issues, leaving some middle tier officials under-resourced and unable to be effective when carrying out their roles. For example, a study in the Eastern Cape highlights that even though their primary job is to visit schools, many subject advisors and circuit staff did not have a car or financial support for transportation needed to make this happen. This led to inadequate staffing, high turnover rates and few school visits (Bantwini & Moorosi, 2018). Additionally, a study on capacity issues of district education offices providing professional development support found a staggering difference in the number of schools that middle tier officers had to support (Bantwini & Diko, 2011). When there are too many schools to provide support to, there just simply is not enough time to provide quality instructional support or successfully translate policy into practice. On top of this, middle-tier officials may lack the necessary knowledge, skills and attitudes required to fulfil their roles, particularly if their own training and development is not prioritised (Smith & Beckmann, 2018). The designation of employment criteria forms part of clarifying the capacity needed at a specific level or role, and while some training is provided to onboard middle-tier officials such as circuit managers, this may not cover the breadth of what their day-to-day work entails.

The review has highlighted the equity and access considerations influencing teacher employment and promotion policy in South Africa, which directly affects the staffing and capacity of middle-tier structures. Where political influence has an effect on hiring and filling posts, capacity issues encountered at middle-tier level may require other solutions that address the effect of local political power on school communities, particularly where this causes teachers and schools to be further disempowered by weak support provision. Moreover, strategic prioritisation of vacant posts (such as filling FET Phase or mathematics subject advisor posts first) results in limited instructional capacity in other subject areas and less guidance for teachers of those subjects to deliver the curriculum. Participants in Bantwini's (2018) research suggested that less focus was dedicated to the GET Phase, specifically the Intermediate (Gr 4-6) and Senior (Gr 7-9) Phases. Teachers in these phases are expected to teach an increased subject load and consolidate the reading and numeracy development of the Foundation Phase into progressively more sophisticated levels of learning, which in South Africa, for many learners, also means a hard pivot from learning in their home languages to learning primarily in English (Bantwini 2018; Spaull et al., 2020). Participants in Bantwini's (2018) study argued that in practice,these phases were critically underserviced and this was likely to have knock-on throughput and quality effects when learners migrated to the FET level.

## Financial and governance dynamics

Since budgetary control does not sit within the district level in South Africa, districts' and circuits' ability to raise their own revenues and act quickly is limited (DBE, 2013). This limitation is further compounded by disconnects between the district and provincial offices

which hinder many district offices' ability to implement plans. Several studies cited that uncoordinated planning and provincial- level attempts to impose intervention plans were often not designed to be well integrated at the district level (Mthembu, 2018; Twalo, 2017).

Districts also face the dual challenge of navigating a bureaucratic structure that demands upward accountability through demonstrating improved performance, while simultaneously needing to provide essential support to schools grappling with poverty and inadequate teaching and learning conditions (Mthembu, 2014; Myende & Maifala, 2020). This tension often leads to frustration among district and sub-level staff, affecting their perceived effectiveness. One study highlights the disparity in relationships between schools and districts, with better-resourced areas experiencing more positive interactions. In contrast, rural schools often feel neglected, as exemplified by parents in Limpopo who reported a lack of district support in rebuilding deteriorating schools (Moses et al., 2017).

## Gender discrimination in middle tier leadership

Even though the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996 forbids gender discrimination, many women still face injustices and inequalities in the education system (Kutu & Zulu, 2022; Madela et al., 2024; Moorosi, 2010). While the government has instituted a 50% target to ensure gender equality in management positions across all sectors, it largely relies on those in these positions, predominantly men, to retire or step down (Memela, 2017). However, setting quotas and appointing women to leadership positions has limited impact as evidence suggests that many women may hold deficit perceptions of their ability to be successful in these roles (Madela et al., 2024; Moorosi, 2010). These assumptions derive from socio-cultural and religious norms which may have patriarchal foundations, and they continue to influence recruitment, selection and promotion processes, often to the detriment of capable female leaders.

Research conducted in the Limpopo Province highlights workplace discrimination against women in educational leadership. The study found that women are frequently sidelined during formal appointment processes, even after serving in interim leadership roles (Madela et al., 2024). This discrimination is often rooted in gender power imbalances, where women are perceived as less capable of leadership, leading to their exclusion from senior positions despite possessing the necessary qualifications and experience.

A study conducted in the Northwest Province of South Africa explored how female district office leaders perceived themselves and their leadership roles. Contrary to other studies, the findings revealed that these women viewed themselves as competent, accomplished and possessing the requisite leadership qualities necessary for career progression (Kutu & Zulu, 2022). This positive self-perception is a significant motivational factor that can propel women to seek higher leadership positions despite the challenges they face.

However, the study also noted that women often experience more difficulties in advancing to leadership positions compared to their male counterparts. This disparity is partly due to the different ways in which women and men perceive leadership. While women's narratives often include reflections on personal experiences and self-perceptions, men's accounts tend to focus more on job responsibilities and achievements. This difference in perspective

underscores the need for a deeper understanding of how self-perception influences women's leadership trajectories (Kutu & Zulu, 2022).

The barriers that prevent women from advancing to leadership positions in South Africa's education system are multifaceted. They include gender-based discrimination, societal expectations and the lack of support systems. For instance, women are often expected to balance professional responsibilities with traditional roles at home, a challenge that is less frequently expected of their male counterparts (Bodalina & Mestry, 2022). This expectation can limit women's availability for leadership roles that demand extensive time and commitment, particularly if they do not have effective professional and personal support to balance competing responsibilities.

# 4 | Research focus, analytical framework & methods

## 4.1 Research focus

This research focuses on the instructional leadership and management practices of middle-tier professionals (MTPs) in supporting underprivileged primary schools in South Africa, recognising that inequities in middle-tier resourcing and capacitation affect poor schools more seriously, especially due to the convergence of multiple forms of deprivation in these contexts (Myende & Maifala, 2020; Van der Berg et al., 2016).

Given the significant gap in research on the role of women in the middle tier, this study explicitly explores the interaction of gender and district functioning and support. This study also looks at the organisational and institutional challenges that influence what kind of support the middle tier can provide, and how effective this support can be in impacting education outcomes.

| Component | Description |
|---|---|
| **Research Design** | Mixed methods approach and mapping to examine the forms of instructional and management support provided by district officials to primary schools and the institutional barriers faced by the middle tier. |
| **Participants** | District directors, district divisional heads, circuit managers, subject advisors, school principals, teachers and education stakeholders. |
| **Data Collection Methods** | Surveys, semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. |
| **Data Analysis** | Descriptive statistics for surveys and thematic coding and analysis for semi-structured interviews and focus groups. |
| **Ethical Considerations** | Consent was obtained from all participants. Confidentiality was ensured through anonymisation of the responses. The project secured ethical permission under the ambit of the Peppertree intervention and its existing relationship to the district. |
| **Limitations** | Findings limited to a few primary schools in KwaZulu-Natal. This may not represent all primary schools within this province and other provinces in South Africa. |

*Table 3: Overview of research approach*

# 4.2 Analytical framework

Based on the literature review, this study explores the practices and impact of middle tier support to schools across two main domains: 1) teaching and learning and 2) education management. It explores issues highlighted by the literature as promising practices in middle tier impact, such as provision of professional development to teachers, facilitation peer learning and using data to allocate resources more equitably. To explore institutional factors impacting middle tier function and impact, this study uses a framework from a recent study by LGI and IIEP (forthcoming) which builds on the IIEP-OECD Capacity Assessment Framework outlining key institutional factors affecting how the middle tier undertakes its functions and influences education outcomes. These factors are categorised under nine main areas or 'levers', each comprising several sub-elements (see Box 1 for more details):

1. Institutional and organisational fit for purpose

2. Clear roles and responsibilities

3. Staff competence and motivation

4. Effective public financing

5. Learning culture

6. Comprehensive school improvement

7. Effective data and research use

8. Stakeholder engagement

9. Cross-sector collaboration

While this study did not look across every lever, it used the framework in conjunction with findings from the literature review on the middle tier in South Africa, to guide design of the research questions. These levers also expand the four priority areas identified for middle tier actors in the South African education system: planning, support, oversight and accountability, and public engagement.

This study includes gender as an element cutting across the institutional levers and explicitly explores the myriad institutional barriers and opportunities for women at the middle tier. Importantly, institutional and organisational factors are often mediated by contextual realities, including socio-historical, economic and political dynamics. This study utilizes a literature review of recent South African education policy and research on the middle tier to illuminate the interdependencies of context and institutional factors.

## 4.3 Methods

This study used a mixed methods approach, beginning with a brief summary of recent literature on the middle tier globally, followed by a literature review of studies on the middle tier in South Africa. The next stage involved qualitative and quantitative primary research involving a combination of surveys undertaken with teachers and school leaders; semi-structured interviews with teachers, school leaders and district officials; and focus group discussions with district officials. The study was undertaken in the KwaZulu-Natal province in Queen Nandi district, with 15 schools conducting the principal and teacher survey, and four of these schools participating in additional qualitative data collection. It is important to note that the schools that participated in this study were part of an ongoing intervention by a local business foundation which has provided sports and cultural resources, development support for parents and school communities, and management and instructional support for teachers, departmental heads and principals. The second part of the primary research focused on interviews with district officials and other education stakeholders from across several provinces, including KwaZulu-Natal, Gauteng, and Western Cape. A focus group was also conducted with a group of women in middle tier leadership roles from Gauteng province. Details on the demographics of survey participants can be found in Annex 1.

The organisation of South Africa's education middle tier is inflected by differences in provincial governance, as noted in the literature review. The relationship between national government and the provinces is thus a carefully negotiated space of cooperative governance, compromise, collaboration and dissent, with varying levels of policy and operational diffusion occurring as responsibilities cascade down to the level of public service provision. The research therefore focused on both situating the specific experiences of teachers, principals and officials within a specific education district, and contextualising the role of the educational middle tier in South Africa more generally through references to insights from officials in other provinces. This is important because policy interpretation and implementation varies across provinces due to the semi-federal governance structure, with the result that the insights from officials in KZN benefited from triangulation with perspectives from middle-tier officials located in other provinces. From this position, we were able to establish which issues were contextually specific to our main research site; whether there were differences in interventions and activities across provinces; how resources were used and, more generally, the different governance approaches in place sub-nationally; and how officials simultaneously managed local and national educational priorities. While not statistically representative of the South African context, the study does offer a more nuanced snapshot of the dynamics influencing middle-tier professionals and the work they do.

The three provinces included in this research were KwaZulu-Natal, the Western Cape, and Gauteng. These three provinces together constitute the largest economic contributors to the South African economy (Statistics SA, 2024), yet they are all still beset by significant wealth inequalities and other socio-political drivers that influence education delivery, specifically to poorer schools. While each province is responsible for implementing and administering national education policy, their provincial governance reflects different arrangements of party political and ideological differences which influence strategic decision-making and operations.

| Data collection method | Participation | Province(s) |
|---|---|---|
| Teacher survey | 149 | KwaZulu-Natal (KZN): 15 schools |
| Principal survey | 14 | KZN: 15 schools |
| **Total questionnaires received** | **163** | |
| Teacher focus group discussions | 4 | KZN: 4 schools |
| Women in middle tier leadership focus group discussions | 1 (n= 5) | Gauteng (GAU) |
| **Total FGD** | **5** | |
| Principal interviews | 5 | KZN: 4 schools |
| Subject advisor interviews | 2 | KZN |
| Circuit manager/Circuit Management Centre (CMC) interviews | 2 | KZN |
| District Official interview | 1 | Western Cape (WC) |
| Former District Official interviews | 3 | KZN, WC and GAU |
| Stakeholder interviews | 1 | cross-provincial |
| **Total interviews** | **14** | |

*Table 4: Overview of data collection methods and sample*

Once the questionnaires from both teachers and principals had been collected from the schools, these were manually sorted and labelled, at the same time checking for duplicates or blank returns before systematically capturing responses in Excel. Following this process, the data was cleaned in order to identify and address any missing or incomplete responses. Descriptive statistics were applied to the organised Excel data to provide an overview of the data and to highlight the trends and correlations before cross-tabulated data was compiled within the workbook. This allowed for a better interpretation of the questionnaire

data in relation to the qualitative findings. Additionally, charts were created to offer a visual representation of the data.

The audio recordings of the interviews and focus group discussions were uploaded to Otter AI for transcription. Once the transcripts had been generated, they were manually reviewed for quality assurance and uploaded onto Atlas.ti software for the initial coding. An iterative codebook was developed based on the key research concepts and themes extracted from the literature reviews and embedded in the data collection instruments. This enabled the identification of themes that emerged from the data, according to which data was then categorised. Additional codes were discussed and added where necessary, with code definitions provided for each assigned code. Further qualitative analysis was also performed using Atlas TI, and along with final anonymised code reports, was part of the data package created from the research process.5 | Analysis and discussion of findings

# 5 | Analysis and discussion of findings

## 5.1 Introduction

This section presents findings from the empirical data collection, including questionnaire data and perspectives shared in interviews and focus groups by principals, teachers, middle-tier professionals and other stakeholders. The first section looks specifically at insights from the district-based research conducted in KwaZulu-Natal, before expanding the discussion to engage with broader issues identified that cut across engagements with research participants from other provinces. The first part of this section explores the dynamics underpinning middle-tier support to schools in KwaZulu-Natal province, while the second part focuses more broadly on comparing features of middle-tier support across the education system. The role of participants quoted in this section is indicated by the following: 'CM' for circuit manager; 'SA' for subject advisor; 'Pr' for principal; 'Dep Pr' for deputy principal; and 'teacher' for teacher.

## 5.2 The dynamics underpinning middle tier support in schools: Findings from KwaZulu-Natal

The provincial context is a vital starting point for situating the issues affecting research participants. KwaZulu-Natal has one of the highest percentages of no-fee schools nationally, with about 80% of learners in ordinary public schools receiving fee-free education (KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education [KZN DoE], 2022). This is 15% higher than the national minimum of 65%, indicating a high level of local poverty. No-fee schools are particularly concentrated in the southern part of the province, with more than five of the 11 education districts having upwards of 90% no-fee schools (KZN DoE, 2022).

The high number of no-fee schools in the province and in our research setting (Queen Nandi district and Mthethwa circuit) contributed to the constraints encountered by teachers, principals and middle-tier professionals in the region. Local poverty is accompanied by high rates of un- and underemployment, including seasonal unemployment; crime and violence are constant challenges and threaten the daily operations of schools (Pakade & Chilenga-Butao, 2021). Because so many schools are reliant on state support, subject advisors, circuit and district officials have their hands full managing their operational needs (Hlalele, 2012). Mr Phumula, one of the KwaZulu-Natal subject advisors, provided a helpful explanation of subject advisors' main role in the system.

Mr Phumula (SA): The main job for a subject advisor is to assist schools, particularly teachers, to sharpen [their] knowledge and the skills, the methods of teaching, delivery of curriculum as a [form of] in-service provision that is provided by the department. The core duty is to assess the teacher in terms of the latest developments in the subject area, as it evolves over time… [we] have to check compliance in terms of the weighting of the subjects, are they provided as given in the policy?... We manage assessment processes. We also manage

reporting if it is done properly, and again, lesson planning, it's a very crucial one, because we have to monitor if they follow the annual teaching plans. (KII_SA_MrPhumula_112024)

Mr Phumula's description of the subject advisor's duties suggests that these professionals are critical to the instructional leadership provided through the national department and aligned to the national curriculum taught in schools. The key difference between subject advisors and circuit managers is that the latter also oversee managerial and operational issues related to school governance as a whole, alongside being the direct supervisors of school principals. Subject advisors are meant to be content specialists and also capacitated to oversee data management, monitoring and policy compliance. Compliance, while essential to the functioning of the system, is also a major contender for subject advisors' available time, and the research demonstrated other constraints that affect middle-tier professionals' work as instructional leaders.

Moreover, as the literature review described, schools' needs are numerous, and demand regularly outstrips available resources and capacity on the ground. This creates further impetus for collaboration between stakeholders to ensure efficient use of resources, cultivating and identifying opportunities for external or additional support, and finding creative solutions to meet infrastructural and educational backlogs. This section provides further discussion of the challenges and opportunities that emerge in the interactions between the middle tier and local schools. This includes issues of rurality, poverty and other contextual factors; challenges facing the middle tier, including competing priorities across phases, complex linguistic challenges and capacity issues; the role of school leadership, external support and clusters in addressing gaps in middle tier support; and support for women in education leadership.

## 5.2.1 Rurality, poverty, and other important contextual factors

Poverty and rurality have a deeply historic relationship in South Africa that belies ordinary categorisations of rural and urban. While the Queen Nandi district is technically 'peri-urban', in fact, its socio-economic character is more closely aligned to indicators of rural poverty. These include geographic isolation or distance from economic hubs; limited infrastructure for social development, recreation and welfare; ageing school facilities and limited access to basic utilities including running water, electricity, sanitation and safe roads connecting rural communities to larger metropolitan areas (Du Plessis & Mestry, 2019; Moletsane, 2012).

> *Mr Phumula (SA): There are areas where there is only one bus a day. It arrives in the area in the morning with teachers. Then by one o'clock, the bus has to leave, to go and fetch those who are working who want to come back and sleep at home. So now you find teachers struggling, if he doesn't have a car to drive himself or herself, or a lift club… [a problem of] 'how do I finish my syllabus?' (KII_SA_MrPhumula_112024)*

Safety challenges are another characteristic of some poorer rural and peri-urban areas that Queen Nandi district also shares. For example, hijacking on major arterial roads is not uncommon, and the research team was warned about this several times in the course of setting up data collection in the area.

Ms Ndebele, the principal of Senzeni Primary School, also noted that she had come to her current post due to an attempt on her life.

> *Ms Ndebele (Pr): In the previous school I was being intimidated in such a way that I was shot. Fortunately enough, I survived, because they only shot the car and then I was on leave for five months. And after five months, the circuit manager took me to one of the schools to assist the principal of that school with managerial and leadership skills. So as the principal of this school retired, then I was appointed to be the principal of this school. (KII_P_ SenzeniPrimary_092024)*

Community-based violence and organised crime is a longstanding challenge in parts of KwaZulu-Natal, as well as other areas in the country, and this has increasingly filtered into school dynamics, particularly in poor communities (Mncube & Madikizela-Madiya, 2014).

For their part, teachers also emphasised the issues of poverty and violence as challenges affecting their ability to provide effective teaching and learning. The survey asked teachers to identify up to three main challenges that affect their work, from a set of options. The main challenge for teachers was the effect of challenging home conditions on learner participation and motivation. Of the 149 survey participants, 110 flagged this in their responses, indicating a high proportion (74%) of teachers affected by this issue. Moreover, teachers also struggled with classroom environments that were not conducive to learning, whether due to overcrowding, structural damage or years of neglect, as observed in some of the schools where empirical data was collected. Heavy seasonal rains caused leaking in a classroom in at least one of the schools visited. Learner discipline and truancy was also a significant challenge, and at least one participant noted under 'Other' that lack of parental involvement severely undercut teachers' ability to enforce discipline at school.

> *Participant 3 (Teacher): I think the department itself needs… to workshop the parents of these learners, not just workshop teachers only because the problem here is back at the home, so if the parent does not know what needs to be done in terms of learning? So obviously there will be a barrier between trying to pass on. So, I think the department itself needs to organize more workshops whereby they workshop the parents of these learners. (FGD_TCH_ IhloboPS_092024)*

> *Ms Dlamini (Pr): Yes, they are not 100% supportive, and those who do come are not those that have been targeted. Yes, let us say we are analyzing the results and stuff. You always target the parents of those learners who have problems and barriers, but when you call them to the meeting, they don't come. Those who come are those with children who are not having problems, but on other matters they do support, like on extracurricular and co-curricular activities, they do support. I don't know, maybe it's their mentality towards learning and teaching, I don't know. But on other things they do support. (KII_P_FreedomParkPrimary_092024)*

Additionally, principals, teachers and middle-tier professionals identified the importance of addressing psychosocial and educational needs in the course of their work, which included administering school feeding schemes to ensure that hunger is not a barrier to learning. At least two of the participant schools were also in the process of growing fruit and vegetable gardens to supplement feeding scheme resources and inform learners and the wider community about sustainable and affordable farming methods. These valuable forms of school-based support are specific to no-fee schools and can cut into the teaching and learning programme without sufficient additional capacity or available time in the school day.

These challenges may not be unique to rural communities, but they are intensified when multiple deprivations intersect to form structural barriers to quality education (Myende & Maifala, 2020). This aspect is discussed further in the following section. The idea of multiple deprivations is proposed by Myende & Maifala (2020) as a means of framing the challenges facing impoverished and rural schools in South Africa. An earlier publication by Moletsane (2012) supports this idea by arguing against a deficit notion of the challenges facing rural schools. Under positive conditions, rural schools can function well and provide high-quality education comparable to that provided in urban schools, while offering a different and perhaps more personalised and localised educational experience (Moletsane, 2012). However, the conditions for this possibility are not currently met in South Africa. Firstly, the challenges of structural poverty and inequality continue to shape the living conditions of many learners and their families, including cycles of migration between rural and urban centres. There is a high-level form of what Fataar (2015) calls 'quintile-hopping', that is, when learners from slightly better off families 'hop' one or two quintiles upwards to attend better schools in other areas. While this is quite common in cities, where commuter schools are a growing part of the educational fabric, it is also identifiable in the decisions that families make to move children away from rural areas to live with relatives or parents in urban and peri-urban centres, where it is hoped they will be able to access a better quality schooling and future work opportunities (Nyika & Shepherd, 2023; Villa et al, 2021).

However, learners may also be sent back to rural areas if circumstances change, meaning that migration may be cyclical for many families; the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, worsened the rate of unemployment in some sectors and regions, contributing to new patterns of migration and internal mobility (Nyika & Shepherd, 2023). This has negative effects on school resourcing and post provisioning, as participants indicated: reduced learner numbers contribute to school closures and lower teacher post allocations to schools, even where this reduces the minimum complement required to teach all grades and subjects offered (Nyika & Shepherd, 2023; Villa et al, 2021).

> *Ms Dlamini (Pr): The department, year after year, they revise the PPN, the post provisional norm of the school. So now, when I came to the school, the PPN was nine, whereas the enrollment was less. When the enrollment increased, the PPN decreased. So now we are running short of a teacher. In other words, I have more load in the classroom than before when I have to be in the office most of the time, so the responsibilities are increasing rather than decreasing. (KII_P_FreedomParkPrimary_092024)*

This also creates a challenge for receiving schools, or what one participant from the Gauteng Education Department referred to as 'admissions pressure': pressure for schools, especially in townships and peri-urban or urban areas, to accommodate internally migrating learners so as not to compromise the continuation of their schooling despite the potentially negative effects of learner churn and overcrowding on quality teaching and learning from year to year. This also means that annual post allocations may lag behind changes in learner numbers on the ground, contributing to teaching and learning pressures. More than one respondent indicated that middle tier professionals need to support principals in managing admissions pressure while also working collaboratively at circuit and district level to plan around potential overflows or outflows in the local school ecosystem.

Ineffective communication and timely payment of school direct allocations were two challenges flagged by principals, who also noted that teacher posts were reduced while the per-learner allocation to schools was also decreased from the national standard. This increased the learner-teacher ratios in participating schools, in some cases from about 1:40 to 1:65, creating a challenging starting point for teachers and affecting the kinds of support they required from middle-tier professionals.

> *Ms Zikode (Pr): I try and do as much as I can, but it's very limited, because the funding is limited, and it's not reaching the school where they're supposed to reach the school. Now they are not giving it to us in full.*
>
> *Interviewer:I saw in the budget for the KZN, the primaries that the norm, I think this year the norm is, let's say, 1 600 per pupil, but that the schools are getting about 400 or 500 under the norm.*
>
> *Ms Zikode (Pr): Exactly, and we are not getting it all. You know, for the term, they give you the tranches. I think they divide it into four. Another term passes, maybe nothing. Get it the following term. You never know when it's coming, and it's not very easy to run a school under those conditions, it makes it really difficult. (KII_P_ChimamandaPrimary_092024)*

The section above provided a brief overview of the challenges of rurality and poverty that contextualise the research setting. While this research is concerned with the instructional leadership and school management support provided by middle-tier professionals in South Africa, these forms of support critically intersect with the material constraints and needs of school communities. A schooling context consists of the school itself and its location within geographic and learner-parent-teacher communities, which, under apartheid, were tightly aligned and differentially provisioned (Fataar, 2015). However, this alignment has loosened in the post-apartheid period as new arrangements of fee-paying and no-fee schools have allowed for the development of a multiracial educational middle-class in fee-paying schools on the one hand, and the concentration of poverty within the sector of no-fee schools receiving additional state support under tighter operational oversight on the other (Fataar, 2015; Gruijters et al., 2022; Marishane, 2013).

## 5.2.2 Challenges facing the middle tier: competing priorities across phases, complex linguistic challenges, and capacity issues

### Competing priorities across phases accompanied and complex linguistic challenges

The circuit manager of the Mthethwa district where the research took place, Ms Madlingozi, was one of several participants who flagged the importance of the Foundation Phase in preparing learners for higher levels of mastery, and the need for circuit managers and subject advisors to be able to monitor Foundation Phase teaching more closely. South African education policy priorities in the post-democratic period have strongly emphasised the importance of Grade 12 'matric' examination[2] results, viewing these as an indicator of system functioning. This perspective has started to shift, particularly as the system learns from several periods of reform.

Teachers and middle-tier participants such as Ms Madlingozi flagged that there is uneven resource and capacity prioritisation of the different educational phases, and specifically reduced attention dedicated to the developmental needs of learners transitioning through Foundation and Intermediate Phases (up to Grade 6).

> *Ms Madlingozi (CM): I'm in charge of 35 schools… 25 of them are primary schools, and 10 of them are high schools. So, […] I have too much on my plate. …I would really, really love to get an opportunity to work with primary schools, because I do believe, strongly believe, that if you set a very firm foundation, good foundation, the need for these extra classes, boot camps, […] and lots of money spent in Grade 12 because we rushing to try and turn things around, you could achieve the same result if we could just work on the foundation so that by the time they reach the high school, they have the basic skills that will enable them to access the knowledge and all the skills that are needed for them to do well in Grade 12. (KII_CM_MsMadlingozi_102024)*

> *Ms Philani (SA): When matrics start writing [in October], we have to forget about our Foundation Phase because the focus now is on matric, for a month and a half. (KII_SA_MsPhilani_112024)*

> *Mr Mthembu (Dep. Pr): Somehow there's very little focus on Grade 4 educators. There's a lot of focus on Foundation Phase education, for obvious reasons because they have to gain the correct foundation, but once they must get into Grade 4, the teachers there are not really well equipped to handle Grade 4s. You know, we are talking about the change in the language of teaching and learning to English. That transition on its own is huge. We're talking about the addition of two subjects … Reading and comprehension is a very big part of it, because if they cannot read for meaning, they can't do all the other subjects. So, we don't really know whether they are really struggling with the content, or is it the literacy that is the problem? Because if they could understand, if we knew that they were proficient in English, they could really write in English, then you would know it's the content. So, it's very difficult to tell. (KII_PDP_UgandaPrimary_092024)*

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2    Called the National Senior Certificate (NSC).

The perspectives above provide vital insight into the issues surrounding support for Foundation and Intermediate Phase teaching and learning. The mandate for ECD recently shifted from the Department of Social Development to the DBE, signalling an important step in consolidating the educational journey from its initial foundations through to grade school and linking both the developmental and educational outcomes of ECD resourcing, support and implementation to children's eventual integration into the schooling system. At the same time, middle-tier actors such as circuit managers have been given an explicit mandate to support teachers and schools to improve the quality of Foundation Phase teaching.

> **Box 3: Language and schooling in South Africa**
>
> South Africa recognises 11 official languages, plus Sign Language, and all 12 languages are technically eligible for use in public schools. Two of these languages held national status under apartheid: English and Afrikaans. African languages were strategically underdeveloped in this time, creating mass pressure for education in English specifically as a form of labour market access. While language policy after apartheid stresses additive bi- or multilingualism, in reality many learners do not develop the sophisticated capacity required to thrive at higher grade levels. This has been a key contributor to South Africa's literacy crisis and forms part of the interlocking challenges currently being prioritised by national and provincial governments.

A focus on literacy and numeracy is emphasised in the transition into and out of the Foundation Phase, though with some caveats. The transition to democracy saw the issue of linguistic identity and language justice brought to the fore, with the result that nine of the indigenous languages in the country received official status, and structures were formed to facilitate their development as national languages. However, this process was not widely coordinated or emphasised for a long time, such that by the end of the first decade of democracy, nearly 70% of all South African learners were still being taught in English in school, despite fewer than 10% of all learners being home-language English speakers (De Kock et al., 2017). Parents see English as the prime lingua franca of the labour market, and many opt for early adoption of English via school governing body (SGB) decisions. In peri-urban and rural areas where a wider variety of languages are spoken, many families may not have the requisite English proficiency to support primary school learners in their reading and literacy development in the language or the resources to commit to additional tutelage in this area. For this reason, school-based forms of support are vital for learner development in South Africa, meaning that middle-tier actors including circuit managers and subject advisors have to work with schools confronting complex linguistic realities in their teaching and learning.

As suggested by Mr Mthembu, deputy principal at Uganda Primary School, many learners are not adequately prepared to make the transition to learning in English in Grade 4, and teachers are not capacitated to mediate learners' negotiation of the increase in scope and complexity from one phase to the next. Recent amendment to the language-in-education policy has raised the grade for language transition from Grade 3 to Grade 6, with the aim of offering teachers and learners more time to consolidate this foundation. However, criticisms of this extension argue that it furthers the segregation of schools by language, which, in

South Africa, has historically served as a proxy for race, class and geographic positioning (Philips, 2004; Staeheli & Hammett, 2010).

Mr Mthembu's point also raises the knock-on effect of poor preparation on learners' general literacy and development of their subject-specific knowledge and skills, something that the circuit manager's perspective confirms. The national government invests heavily in the Further Education and Training Phase, and specifically in preparing teachers and students for the Grade 12 NSC. As indicated by Ms Madlingozi, this includes activities such as bootcamps, catch-up sessions, holiday and after-school classes, and pre-exam retreats. Part of this preparation is geared towards 'mopping up' what are cumulative learning gaps that result from successive years of low or uneven educational quality (Fleisch et al., 2017; Spaull, 2015).

> *Ms Zikode (Pr): It was very, very helpful for me to start [as principal] at the high school, because I [came] knowing the learning problems that the learners have in high school. So, my job was to bridge those gaps. I knew exactly what to teach, what to make sure that is being stressed in primary school, in order to assist the learner in high school, the things that they need, what they should be equipped with for each and every subject.  (KII_P_ChimamandaPrimary_092024)*

Participants such as Ms Zikode above shared the view with previous research indicating that there is a limit to how much strengthening and improvement can be done at the high school stage, particularly in the sciences, mathematics and other subjects where learners build on successive levels of complexity in order to progress (Cooper et al 2021; Fleisch et al., 2017). This explains why these participants advocated for strengthening the quality of earlier phases first, rather than concentrating resources at the terminal phase where, additionally, many prospective matriculants would have already prematurely exited the system (Spaull, 2015).

Many participants, including the circuit manager, also had some experience teaching in high schools, which Ms Zikode stressed was a critical factor influencing their approach to improving learning outcomes in primary schools because these individuals came with first-hand knowledge of the effect of Foundation Phase education quality on later stages of learners' development. This is supported by Pretorius and Spaull (2022), who found that weak early-grade decoding and fluency development affects future reading comprehension[3], constraining the zone of linguistic complexity that learners are able to attain at progressively higher levels. Teachers with high school experience knew this because they encountered older learners who lacked basic reading comprehension and struggled to cope with a more advanced syllabus, and several suggestions were made to strengthen the accountability and effectiveness of early-years teaching.

For middle-tier professionals, this created pressure to provide instructional support that could resolve material limitations within primary schools while equipping teachers with a sophisticated blend of pedagogic, content and administrative skills suited to their needs and work environments.

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3       Based on Ardington et al.'s (2020) study of COVID-19 learning loss in South Africa.

## Limited middle tier capacity

School-based teachers have limited contact with education officials as their departmental heads and subject advisors are the main actors responsible for their capacity development, evaluation and support. Principals have slightly more contact with mid-tier professionals, especially circuit managers and their staff, because circuit managers are responsible for the development, evaluation and support provided to the school leaders within their ambit. The limited individual and interpersonal contact that ordinary teachers have with subject advisors and other mid-tier professionals, as other senior officials in the education system, means that teachers' main avenue for engagement with the employer (provincial and national departments of education) and recourse is through the teacher unions, which act as their collective voice in the system nationally and provincially. This will be discussed in more detail in the section comparing perspectives from mid-tier professionals in other provinces, but it is worth noting that several participants, including the circuit manager, suggested that political undue interference presents an increasing challenge to education quality because individuals may be hired into middle-tier posts they are not qualified for. At the same time, when people leave or retire from office-based posts, these sometimes remain vacant indefinitely, increasing pressure on those remaining to pick up the slack.

> *Ms Madlingozi (CM): I've identified that we do have challenges here and there, but unfortunately, vacancies are not filled. We have quite a number of vacancies that are not filled. Even here in our CMC [Circuit Management Centre], admin staff [are] scanty, we rely on those two, who are interns. The same applies to office-based specialists, some of them have retired, [or] opted for other avenues, no replacements. So, in the district, just imagine in the whole of the Queen Nandi district, for example, for GET, which is where I think we should be paying more attention, we have less than 10, especially that can assist the whole of Queen Nandi district… I'm talking about all the schools in all the circuits, more than 16 circuits that I alluded to. (KII_CM_ MsMadlingozi_102024)*

> *Ms Dlamini (Pr): What I've seen is that if one person leaves the office, they don't get replaced. Like, for instance, we had a guy in the circuit office who was responsible for taking all the documents that are supposed to go to the HR in Durban. Now he was taken away from this circuit office, there was no one else. So now, as a principal, let us say, for instance, I had to take the leave forms and submit at the HR offices in Durban. I'll go to the circuit office, the circuit manager will sign and then I, myself must drive to the HR. There's no one now who's a runner between the two offices. (KII_P_FreedomParkPrimary_092024)*

The scenario described by Ms Dlamini above captures the intersection of skills and resource shortages at middle-tier level in adding to the workload of school-based staff, while also drawing them away from their primary duties. In this situation, the principal had to drive to the circuit office for signatures before making a journey of 50 kilometres to the main city to file paperwork on a school day, a trip which took at least 40 minutes in free-flowing traffic. School-based participants challenged the need to perform administrative or professional

development tasks during teaching time, particularly where this demand – created by the downward pressure of middle-tier limitations – compromised their own ability to maintain consistency in teaching and learning in similarly resource-deprived school settings. Unfilled middle-tier posts are one of the factors affecting capacity within circuit offices and the deployment of subject advisors, and participants suggested reasons for these vacancies that included undue interference in hiring processes by either middle-tier leaders or union officials, and the slow pace of replacing staff as they retired or left the system.

It is important to note that often this resulted in schools and school leaders taking initiative before the middle-tier could respond effectively, and middle-tier actors plugging whatever gaps they have the resourcing and capacity to. As discussed previously, the linguistic needs of different schools also factor into the kinds of support middle-tier actors can offer, and how much can be leveraged through subject advisors who are specialists within their curriculum fields. If there are not enough subject advisors who are professionally capacitated to advise schools and teachers on language instruction, schools are compelled to take their own initiative or find alternative sources of support.

## 5.2.3 The role of school leadership, external support and clusters in addressing gaps in middle tier support

### School leadership support to teachers

Teachers and middle-tier professionals working in the district expressed the importance of bridging deprivations wherever possible to stimulate quality teaching and learning, while also acknowledging that promising interventions often had sparse impact due to scheduling challenges, resource constraints, limited time, and lack of buy-in from fellow colleagues, school leadership or the parent community.

Teachers identified the main challenges confronting their work, and 6 were also asked who the main support partners were who assisted them with the challenges identified, with the frequency of their responses captured in Figure 6.
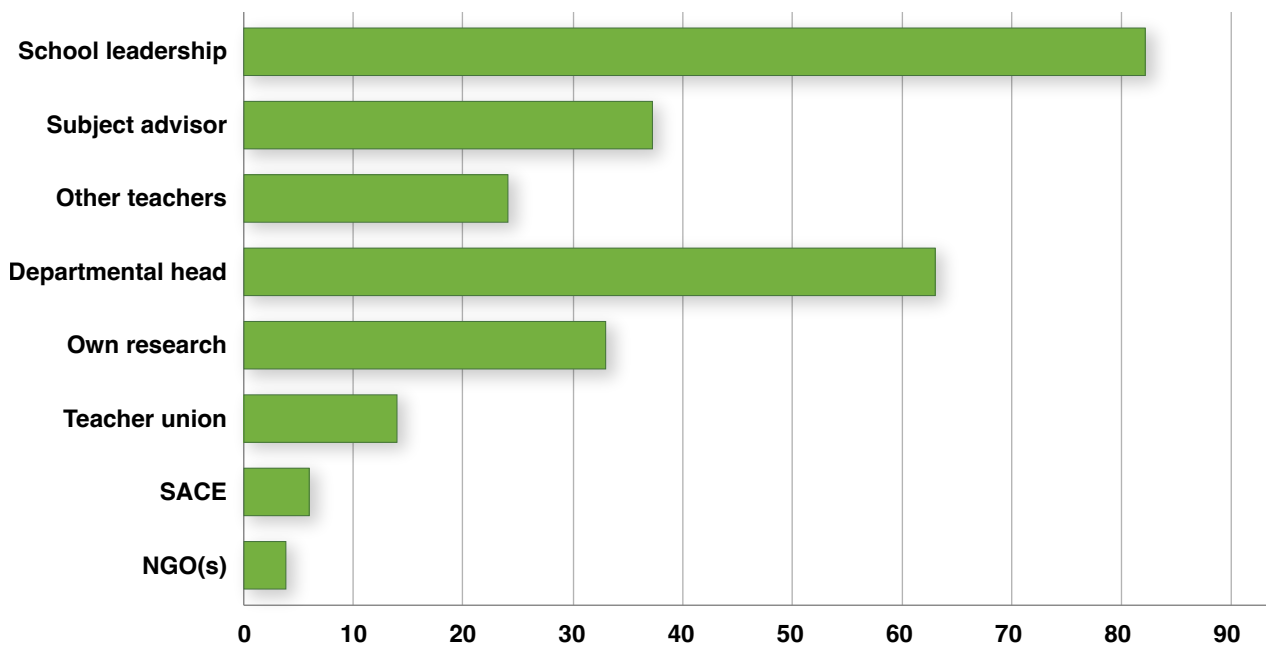
*Figure 3: Sources of support for challenges faced by teachers (Questionnaire)*

The survey findings confirm insights from the qualitative data that suggest school leadership and the leadership approach of principals were key influences on teacher motivation and dedication, especially given the limited time that teachers had available with subject advisors and other middle-tier professionals. Principals and departmental heads readily stepped in to bridge this gap, though many principals and departmental heads also had teaching responsibilities of their own, especially in poorer primary schools, and so had to balance their instructional leadership with active time in the classroom.

> **Box 4: Peppertree intervention in participating schools**
>
> Peppertree provides a holistic school development programme led by an NGO for about 20 primary schools grouped in a single circuit with CSI funding from a national retail company. The main foci of the 2024 programme are:
>
> •Advancing school leadership and management capabilities, paired with collaborative development and monitoring of individual school improvement plans.
>
> •Teacher development for the Foundation Phase, based on a 'learning through play' approach, combined with enrichment to improve teacher content knowledge and pedagogy.
>
> •Learner mathematic skills development through application of an AI-based maths programme.
>
> The group of schools also participates in online common termly assessments to track learner progress. The programme is well received and valued as it designs programmes that respond to the expressed needs of teachers and school management. Circuit managers and subject advisors also participate in evaluation and planning workshops every term.

Strong principals could alleviate some of the constraints of limited resources, for example, by approaching local businesses for additional funding or using school facilities to draw additional income, such as offering advertising space on unused external walls. These funds were used to address urgent needs where the allocation to the school fell short, including paying for security to prevent recurrent break-ins where valuable equipment was stolen. Principals, for their part, argued that this fundraising work added another layer to their workload and was not something they were effectively trained for; moreover, they felt their efforts were successful through ongoing relationship-building with other professionals in the system who connected them to opportunities where these arose. The participating schools were also part of an intervention providing additional holistic school development support (see Box 4 for more details).

## External support to schools

It is quite likely that the principals participating in this study had slightly more internal authority than their peers at other schools, given that the support provided by the Peppertree intervention also opened up access to greater visibility and further support for their schools and created small networks of positive change and collaboration within the area. Principals could leverage these benefits to motivate teachers towards further improvements. This was buttressed by the involvement of former mid-tier professionals such as Mr Magaba and Mr Mashaba as senior employees in the intervention who provided the system-level understanding that shaped how the intervention engaged with participating schools and their needs. The intervention is interesting because it fulfils some of the responsibilities associated with the middle-tier, while working closely within the Mthethwa circuit to capacitate teachers and school leaders for more effective, holistic teaching and learning.

*Mr Magaba (CCM): The department is so busy, so these projects are helping both because they close the gap on a small scale. It will take four months for a circuit manager to collect this but for a project, it can take even two weeks, as long as there's a working relationship between a person from the project and the schools. (KII_R.CMC_MrMagaba_102024)*

It is not uncommon for schools in the South African context, especially no-fee schools, to be connected to non-governmental organisation (NGO) and philanthropic networks that provide additional resources, funding or capacity development. However, the nature of these interventions varies widely in depth, scope of provision, duration and overall vision, and it is unclear how many schools receive external support of some kind. These interventions intersect with government programmes implemented through non-governmental partners, which also extend the reach of professional and managerial development opportunities to schools in particular need of them. The actual reach of these interventions is significantly affected by financial constraints and also requires school staff to buy in to them over a period of time, which is not something principals can guarantee if they do not have strong internal authority.

This NGO-driven support can be a lifeline to schools struggling with capacity or resourcing constraints, but it also emerges from the limited capacity of districts and circuits to effectively respond to the needs of all the schools within their ambit. Participants in the KZN component of the empirical research noted that the penetration of these NGOs varies; some interventions work from district or provincial level or approval, while others are introduced through circuit managers or from the bottom-up, through interventions that enter at the school level and are expanded across a specific region (such as the Peppertree programme). This means that at times district staff may not have full information about the number and scope of interventions operating within schools, and the depth of schools' and teachers' participation. At the same time, as Mr Magaba's point indicated, these interventions inject capacity that can alleviate time constraints affecting middle-tier actors, strengthening the localised support available to schools that would otherwise be solely reliant on a highly-constrained middle tier.

## School clustering

Middle-tier professionals do offer teachers and principals instructional and managerial support, but this support is constrained by the large number of schools in the district and the limited number of subject advisors and circuit officials available to serve all of them. School clustering has been a successful way to break circuits down into smaller sub-units, with dedicated managers to oversee these groups of schools, although there was greater impetus for high schools to buy into the collaborative and communicative opportunities of clustering because teachers were working towards a standardised exit examination. It was also suggested by the circuit manager that high school teachers were more open to this level of peer engagement than teachers in primary schools.

*Ms Madlingozi (CM): The clusters are working well in the high schools, particularly because of the external exam, and there's more emphasis and more focus on clustering in the high school. There's no term-to-term cluster moderation [in primary schools] like it happens in the FET phase every term after assessment, because they're writing common papers. It's impossible to run a cluster assessment when each and every school was assessing according to its own standards. In the past, when I was still a principal, the circuit manager that was here at the time tried to put us into clusters at primary school level, so that we have common papers, but because they were a separate thing, people opted not to participate, and you have no way of forcing them to, because there's nothing on paper that says you have to, unlike the FET [where] if you're an underperforming school, you have no choice, you must participate in the common assessment because it is meant to assist you. (KII_CM_MsMadlingozi_102024)*

While Ms Madlingozi recognised that schools needed the latitude to tailor their teaching to learners' needs, she also argued that it was important to track learner and school performance in the earlier grades through some form of common assessment that could provide more detail on individual and shared learning gaps across schools. Information on NSC performance is used by the department to compel underperforming high schools to participate in additional teacher and learner development in preparation for the Grade 12 examination but the lack of a similar instrument in the primary grades makes it difficult to achieve the same level of collaboration around curriculum and assessment planning or to accurately target all underperforming primary schools.

School clustering can be an effective way of grouping schools to work together to improve their performance, but as the above indicates, existing levers within the system make it easier for clustering to work at high school level where teachers work towards a common national assessment. The normalisation of this collaboration has not yet taken root in primary schools where teachers may be more accustomed to working only with their peers or smaller groups of colleagues from other schools, and where there is no external leverage (such as a national exam) to compel them to commit to working in designated clusters. Middle-tier actors have the authority to compel underperforming primary schools to participate in dedicated development and learning improvement activities, but this only applies to schools that fall below a minimum acceptable threshold – meaning that other struggling schools may equally need the support but are not yet required or compelled to engage. Thus, while clustering supports more effective middle-tier administration, it cannot produce improved school performance without buy-in from teachers and school leaders, or without the necessary capacity to sustain the developmental potential of clusters throughout the academic year.

## 5.2.4 Support for women in education leadership

It was evident from the qualitative data collected that a number of women benefited from government support targeted specifically at improving the demographic and equity profile of the public service, including education. The Minister of Basic Education in South Africa has publicly addressed the importance of empowering women leaders at every level of the

education system, launching initiatives such as the Provincial Support Networks for Women Leaders in 2022. These networks are aimed at supporting women into positions of leadership within schools and at office-based level, as well as providing the collegial and professional support for new leaders to thrive in their working environments.

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*Box 5: Challenges faced by women in the middle tier*

Challenges faced by women in middle-tier leadership in South Africa include:

A slower growth path into leadership roles

The undue burden of care and support work, both personally and as teachers, departmental heads and subject advisors

Stereotypes about femininity and the inappropriateness of women to lead in government departments

Rejection of leadership approaches favoured by some women leaders which encourage deeper communication and collaboration.

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Part of the national DBE's recognition of the need for more women in leadership emerges from statistics that point to stubborn legacies of differentiation in school leadership, where men continue to be placed in senior management positions and where the existing pipeline is bottlenecked by the lack of women being promoted further into leadership positions(DBE, 2022; Wills & Böhmer, 2023). Wills and Böhmer (2023) confirm in their research that while 70% of teachers in South Africa are women, women only make up 39% of school leaders. Women are also more represented in middle-management and instructional leadership roles, such as departmental heads, than in school leadership and office-based leadership positions (Wills & Böhmer, 2023). Participants such as Ms Ndebele (principal of Senzeni Primary), were intimidated and threatened, preventing them from working in specific schools. Assumptions about personal strength and safety sometimes formed part of the reasons for women being overlooked as promising leadership candidates. Moreover, women were more likely to be primary school principals than high school principals, although participants such as Ms Madlingozi (CM: Mthethwa circuit) argued that women could be very effective leaders in high schools when given the opportunity, and that sometimes the leadership approach taken by women leaders was received as more effective, collaborative and sensitive to social and interpersonal dynamics than their predecessors.

Ms Philani (SA) also noted that ingrained stereotypes could hold women back from progressing at the same pace as their male counterparts in leadership and promotion opportunities.

*Ms Philani (SA): There was this thing traditionally [that] it must be female teachers who are teaching in the Foundation Phase. So then you'll find that in some schools, when it comes then to departmental heads, you find that they'll prefer to hire a male […] who was not even in the Foundation Phase as a teacher, will then now come and head the phase. We have a few of those schools where we have such instances, whereas it should be because we have the majority as female teachers, then it means departmental heads also must be female. (KII_SA_MsPhilani_112024)*

National government support for transforming the gender and demographic profile of education leadership and office-based management has been a consistent feature of post-apartheid transformation policy, and participants confirmed that interventions were in place to fund and support the leadership development of promising candidates (with dedicated support identified for women specifically). These included the provincial support networks for women leaders, government funding for their professional development (including further study), and mentorship to support incumbents into new leadership roles. These opportunities were highlighted by participants such as Ms Porteus (Head of Curriculum Support in a Western Cape district) for opening up the space for interested women teachers to further their careers within the system.

Where they encountered friction was at the level of individual circuits or districts, where women were overwhelmingly responsible for instructional leadership and support functions to schools, but did not have decision-making authority or the influence to stimulate changes directly. Anecdotally, this was largely because women formed a significant proportion of subject advisors and circuit-based staff but were not always well-represented in district and provincial leadership structures. Moreover, the considerations that women participants took into account in their professional journeys were not necessarily accommodated in the preparation and support they received to enter into middle-tier and office-based posts. These considerations included undue amounts of care and emotional labour, availability for childcare and family responsibilities, balancing personal wellness with professional demands, and navigating increased pressure to prove their ability to lead assertively and decisively.

## 5.3 Aspirations and realities of middle tier support

### 5.3.1 Responses to middle tier constraints: Strategic resource deployment, peer collaboration and resource sharing, external support and the role of circuit managers and subject advisors

**Strategic resource deployment**

Despite the challenges discussed in the previous sections, school-based participants spoke positively of the support provided by the middle-tier professionals they worked with, with the main criticism being that these professionals were spread thin and often unable to provide the level of support and contact that schools required. This was compounded by issues of safety and resourcing, as indicated by Ms Dlamini.

> *Ms Dlamini (Pr): Of late, I think it's because of the safety in the area. Advisors don't regularly come to schools, but they organise groups to go to the circuit office. There's a resource center there, and they meet with the teachers there, instead of coming individually to the school, because there were cases of others being hijacked. They were taking the department cars. So, I think they felt that it's safer if they go to the resource center and meet the teachers there. But they do visit our circuit. (KII_P_FreedomParkPrimary_092024)*

Where safety, the availability of departmental vehicles and available funds for travel affected the mobility of subject advisors, this had the effect of reducing the average number of school visits that middle-tier professionals could make and thus the depth of work they could do in that time in each school. Several participants claimed that this could be as low as one or two visits per school per year, with most communication taking place over dedicated WhatsApp groups or through specific sessions organised for individual subjects, phases or roles (such as departmental heads or principals). Figure 4 indicates the extent of contact that teachers had with middle-tier professionals.

> *Ms Zikode (Pr): She's involved, although the relationship is more telephonic now, we have a WhatsApp group with the circuit manager. Everything we get from the WhatsApp group. She communicates more through that than physical communication, but there is communication, and we have a good relationship. At least she was the principal before she became the circuit manager so she understands the frustrations that come with being the principal. (KII_P_ ChimamandaPrimary_092024)*

> *Ms Mdoda (Pr): Our circuit manager is overseeing 35 schools, and her focus is mostly on [the schools] at-risk. So, at the circuit level, that is why we need PLCs, because there's really nothing at the circuit level. At the circuit level, it's supposed to be the subject advisor who comes to support, that's it. They come and conduct the workshops. With Foundation Phase, Grades R to 3, at least they do a lot of content workshops, [though] not enough (KII_PDP_ UgandaPrimary_092024)*
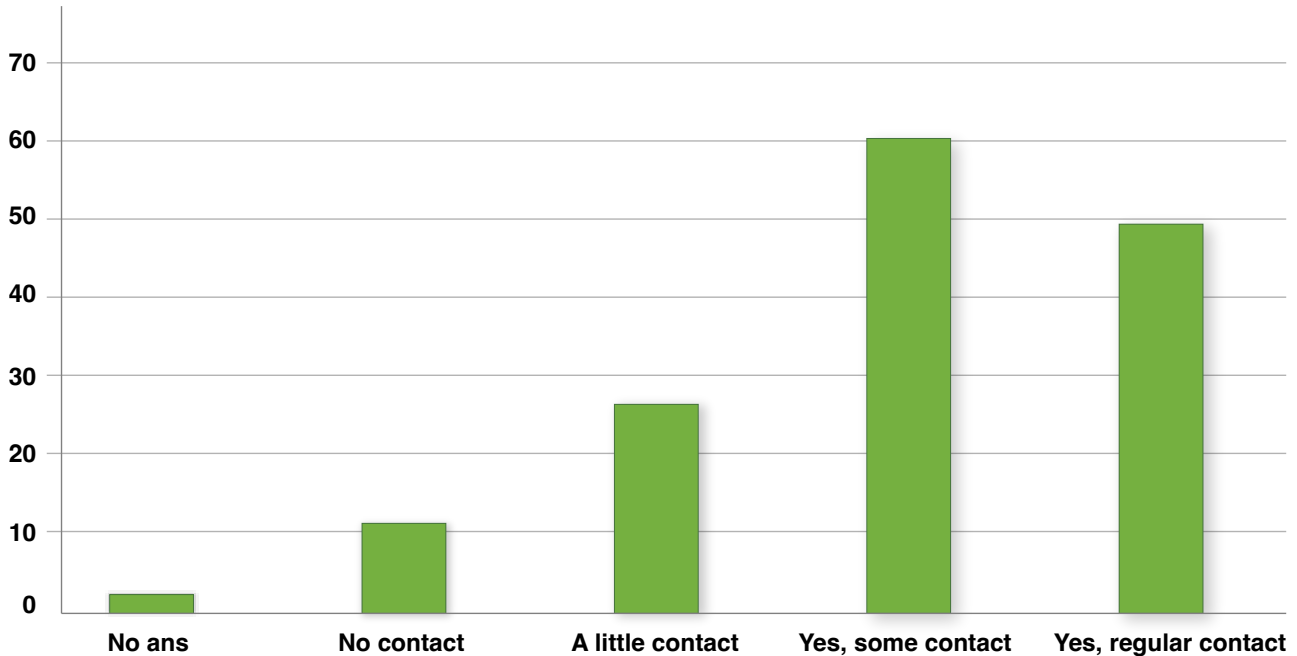
*Figure 4: Level of contact between teachers and MTPs*

Ms Madlingozi confirmed school-based participants' suggestion that subject advisors and circuit officials tended to focus on schools with the greatest support and teaching improvement needs.

*Ms Madlingozi (CM): What we are doing because of the challenges of staffing, we encourage them to spend more time at those schools that have challenges more than the ones that are seemingly doing well. Even they, themselves, when they encounter because they do have a challenge sometimes of stubborn educators who do not want to take the advice from subject advisors. (KII_CM_ MsMadlingozi_102024)*

She further explained that even though subject advisors did not have the desirable amount of time in each school, they were still able to pick up on important skills and resourcing issues on their school visits. In conveying this information to the circuit and district authorities, subject advisors made recommendations to inform the improvement of individual schools, such as by recommending that a different teacher in a school take on a specific grade because they were more experienced at that level. Circuit managers were sometimes asked to enforce specific recommendations or changes at the school level where subject advisors were not taken seriously at first; it is likely due to the direct accountability relationship between the circuit manager and school principals that subject advisors were able to circumvent resistant teachers or school leaders in this way. District directors could also be called on to intervene where necessary, and it was not uncommon for circuit managers to call on districts to provide

an additional layer of authority in dealing with disciplinary issues (both teacher- and learner-related) and instructional challenges.

## Peer collaboration and resource sharing

Teachers and middle-tier professionals developed creative strategies to overcome the material and capacity constraints they faced. WhatsApp groups were one example, flagged by participants several times. These groups allowed for regular updates and contact with subject advisors and offered a space where teachers could share resources with each other. They served as virtual extensions of PLCs, which existed to varying degrees of depth in participating schools. Because the Peppertree intervention also focused on teacher development and support, there is additional impetus for schools to form PLCs within the network where teachers can engage, reflect and collaborate to improve their practice.

Useful opportunities emerged from these connections. For example, several schools implemented team-teaching or peer teaching, where either a teacher co-taught a section of the syllabus with a more experienced peer within the school, or a teacher from a collaborating school came in to teach a specific unit with the actual class teacher observing and receiving practical guidance to cover that content in future. In high schools, this extended to hosting large-scale extra classes run by subject teachers from multiple schools at a local boarding facility. Fostering collegiality and shared agency is a critical part of the work that school leaders and subject advisors do to motivate teachers to explore ways to strengthen their practices, because trust is a necessary condition for teachers to share their knowledge and experiential gaps without the fear that this could affect their employment or professional status. PLCs offered teachers a space where trust and understanding could develop over time, such that when individual schools do collaborate on specific activities these are more effectively aligned to their reciprocal needs and available resources. This can be quite practical, including the sharing of teaching, classroom or extracurricular facilities between schools.  Participants suggested that while the actual reach of the intervention was limited by funding, there were still a number of ways to partner with other local schools to spread the benefit of the programme beyond its network of schools, including sharing equipment, resources, knowledge and teaching strategies.

Middle-tier officials, such as subject advisors, set up WhatsApp groups as dedicated communication channels with the teachers they work with, differentiating each group by e.g. location, phase, subject or grade. These are useful spaces to share news, teaching resources and updates, to observe teachers' engagement on particular matters, and to foster collaborative opportunities. These groups also provide up-to-date information for advisors to tailor their visits and school support, and to be available virtually where they are unable be physically present in schools on a more regular basis. PLCs are a designated form of school-based professional development provided for within national policy, intended to support teachers' professional learning and meant to be driven at the local level. Circuit managers and subject advisors are responsible for supporting the work of PLCs by providing resources and shared space for meeting, offering or sharing workshop opportunities relevant to teachers' needs, and monitoring their activities over time. However, the impetus for these PLCs has to emerge from within schools and be driven by teacher interest in order to see

success, and the actual penetration of PLCs as a sustainable form of teacher development varied across schools in the research.

## Complementary external support

Interventions offered by NGOs and non-profit organisations provide a closer layer of targeted support to schools that can address some of the limitations of the middle tier in impoverished contexts. Mr Mashaba provided a valuable explanation of how this worked for the Peppertree intervention: the additional teacher and curriculum support provided by the programme complemented, rather than fully replaced, the professional development and content workshops offered by subject advisors and other departmental interventions, which were limited by their generality and their size and often by distance too.

> *P3 (Teacher): With these workshops, the venues are too far from us. So, we will find an opportunity to attend the workshop at New Highland primary school, and we are from Arnstad and Suncrest. So, can you imagine the distance? Then it's a date issue, maybe it's on the 20th of the month and you find that we don't have money at that time of the month so we cannot attend the workshops, and the school doesn't have the money, right? We are not funded by the school for professional development. (FGD_TCH_IhloboPS_092024)*

Having more immediate support and capacity development available, including partners that can bring these opportunities directly to schools, significantly reduces the burden of planning and resourcing workshop attendance. Needs analyses were conducted by the Peppertree implementation team to identify how best to support each individual school, and where support could be clustered by specific needs. In this way the programme could host smaller workshops targeting specific skill areas such as assessment, reading and literacy or digital skills, offering these sessions to the teachers who most needed them and using the needs analyses to tailor workshop contents to attendees. By comparison, Mr Mashaba suggested that departmental workshops (planned through provincial or district levels) varied in usefulness to the teachers attending them based on their own experience, practices and skill level. Because of time and the large size of these sessions (sometimes numbering 200 attendees), facilitators also could not guarantee coverage of all important topics in depth. Moreover, Ms Philani, a subject advisor within the Queen Nandi district, suggested that limited follow-ups were also a challenge to the development process.

*Ms Philani (SA): After developmental workshops, it's so unfortunate because it's only three of us in Queen Nandi district for Foundation Phase, so you'll find that you'll be training teachers, and then afterward, we expect to visit schools [to] check if they are implementing, and also if there are any improvements. Because in improvement, the expectation [is that you would] be calling in a few learners at school, so that they come and actually read for you, rather than just sitting in the classroom and then checking if the teachers are teaching reading correctly. So, we find that, because of lots of programmes that we have, we only train teachers and then expect teachers to go back and implement, and then we don't have time for follow-ups. (KII_SA_MsPhilani_112024)*

Within this context, the capacity injected by NGOs becomes essential for addressing capacity gaps and providing follow-up support. Mr Mashaba and Ms Madlingozi agreed that the employer held final responsibility to capacitate staff, but that NGOs offered useful learning opportunities for the system that could find wider application in other resource-constrained settings. Middle-tier leaders, through districts or circuits, do formally report on the activities of NGOs providing development and support to schools to ensure alignment to the national curriculum and relevant professional standards. Ms Madlingozi indicated that this happened at least once a term, though with more informal day-to-day communication occurring between schools, their NGO partners and middle-tier officials.

The additional capacity and support brought by NGO partners also bridges some of the positional limitations of, for example, no-fee schools and subject advisors. In the case of no-fee schools, NGO partners inject additional resources that contribute to school and educational improvement, which can also have a positive effect on teachers' motivation. Where additional support in the form of curriculum, teaching and managerial specialists is provided (as with Peppertree), this also eases some of the pressure on subject advisors to meet all the instructional development needs of teachers in these schools, as emphasised by Ms Philani. Subject advisors are then able to work with departmental heads and principals to strengthen available support or divert attention to other urgent issues within schools, clusters or circuits. The effect of this additional capacity is an admirable example of stakeholder partnerships at work in the area, but, as Ms Madlingozi observed, it is expensive for NGOs/non-profit organisations to offer programmes focused on holistic school and teaching development, which limits their actual reach on the ground. Budgetary constraints or reductions within these organisations can also leave capacity vacuums that cannot be alleviated by middle-tier support, particularly where external interventions have been a necessary supplement to limited state capacity.

## The role of circuit managers and subject advisors

Circuit managers' responsibilities include coaching and professional support to principals, managing disciplinary and professional disputes, circulating curriculum and policy updates, steering data monitoring and strategising, supporting collaboration and overseeing school and teacher evaluation. In reality, these responsibilities and the reporting requirements that accompany them are regularly undercut by more immediate demands, with the effect that while circuit managers plan their itineraries for school engagement and share these with

districts, at any given time they could be pulled away from their main responsibilities to fill in a gap somewhere else. Effective digital communication with subject advisors and chief circuit managers (in the context of clusters) alleviates some of this pressure for circuit managers by allowing them to reflect, delegate and receive timely updates on areas of concern; but the lack of professionals in vacant posts also constrains the breadth of what subject advisors are able to achieve in individual schools. This is also a challenge faced by circuit managers in balancing their managerial and administrative tasks with the professional support needed by principals.

> *Ms Madlingozi (CM): Coaching of principals happens all the time…. it does happen. The thing is, you coach, but coaching is not enough. You have to monitor it. That's where we lose the plot, because we give them the capacity, we coach them, we do that. But if I have capacitated you, I need to assess you time and again to see if you're on the right track, so that should you need more assistance, we are able to provide. (KII_CM_MsMadlingozi_102024).*

Curriculum, content and pedagogy workshops were also arranged by subject advisors, with particularly valuable programming offered to teachers in the Foundation Phase. Overall, the main challenge affecting these workshops was the regularity and consistency of sessions over time, a challenge that was also encountered in the coaching offered by circuit managers to school leaders. For subject advisors, one of the other challenges confronting their capacity development efforts was the tendency for some schools to move teachers to different grades annually or as required to address a specific need.

> *Mr Phumula (SA): The district has, in a way, recommended that each teacher per subject, at least should be retained three to five years, if [they are] still within the same school, so that the capacity is sustained and the experience in the subject matures with the teachers, because if they change every year, it means the whole support is lost down the drain. (KII_SA_MrPhumula_112024)*

While teacher rotation within schools could be helpful when targeted effectively, it also meant that teachers could be found teaching out of their actual phase of specialisation, and that the support offered by subject advisors is 'washed out' through limited time for teachers to consolidate their own knowledge. This was another common challenge that specifically affected primary schools and the Senior Phase up to Grade 9 in high school.

> *Mr Phumula (SA): With GET, that is Grades R to 9, the thinking is outdated, [in that] primary school teachers were not [seen as] specialists. They were 'general' teachers, they were trained to teach all the subjects in a primary school. Management is still having that hangover that if you are a teacher between Grades R and 9, they can change you anyhow, because you are not a specialist, but when coming to FET, it's a different story with FET, the thinking again, is that you've got a major in a particular subject, or two subjects, that you [specialise in]. So, it's not easy in the FET to change you willy-nilly, but with the GET band, that was the main cause of the problem. Things are beginning to change slowly, but we still suffer [from] that hangover. (KII_SA_ MrPhumula_112024)*

The distinction between phases does not only represent successive levels of sophistication, but also an expanded subject load from phase to phase, meaning that teachers moving to different grades are also required to take on more subjects at a higher level of complexity. It is noteworthy that some teachers in the study were teaching out-of-phase, that is, not in the phase they were qualified to be teaching in. Some teachers also taught in more than one phase, such as offering mathematics or language instruction to higher grades.

**● Foundation Phase  ● Intermediate Phase  ● Senior Phase  ● FET Phase**
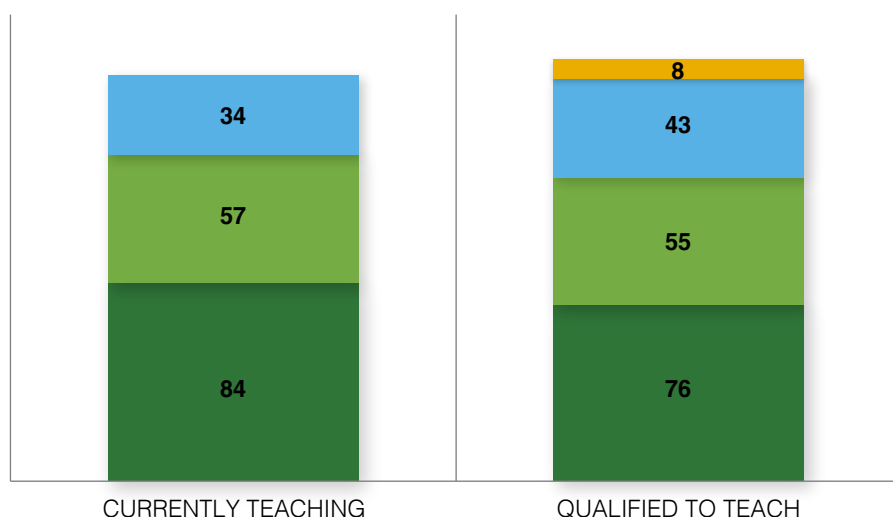


*Figure 5: Teacher phases vs qualifications*

In practice what this means is that phase specialisation within primary schools varies significantly. Not only do high school teachers opt for teaching or leadership posts in primary schools, but teachers in primary schools also move between phases at times, even where their qualification may not cover the specialised needs of a specific phase. This adds to the complexity of the work that circuit managers and subject advisors have to do: if the observed trend of out-of-phase teaching is common in other schooling contexts, it means that the capacity development, teaching and learning improvement and professional support offered by subject advisors may not have the desired effect because out-of-phase teachers may lack the assumed foundational knowledge integral to taking up the lessons from support available.

This section has contextualised the work of the middle tier with schools in the Queen Nandi district in KwaZulu-Natal, finding that while the policy and regulatory context exists to articulate instructional leadership and support at successively more localised levels, capacity and resource constraints are major obstacles to the development of effective middle-tier support. Moreover, these constraints also intersect and compound each other's effects, such as when unfilled circuit or subject advisor posts increase pressure on available middle-tier staff, limiting their available time for scheduled visits as well as opportunities for more regular follow-ups. The next section engages with these realities in discussion with perspectives shared by middle-tier professionals based in other provinces, allowing for some comparative analysis of how contextual differences may influence the depth and quality of middle-tier support.

# 6 | Features of middle-tier support and intervention: a comparative discussion

## 6.1 Understanding provincial and local differences in middle-tier capacity and their ability to mobilise resources

It is evident from the Kwazulu-Natal findings that contextual dynamics feature significantly in the actual effects of policy implementation in schools; these dynamics include the role of structural poverty, crime and violence on maintaining a consistent programme of teaching and learning; the limited authority that principals in no-fee schools have to manage the resources allocated to them by government; and the scarcity of deep instructional support from the middle tier. Principals and departmental heads fulfil much of the development and support needs of teachers in their schools, buttressing this through establishing PLCs, drawing on available middle-tier professionals' capacity, and cultivating relationships with external partners to address urgent priorities.

While the main research site was in Kwazulu-Natal, additional interviews were conducted with middle-tier professionals working in the provincial departments in Gauteng and the Western Cape. This offered another layer of contextual and comparative understanding of middle-tier operations across provinces in South Africa, underscoring inequalities that are both geographic and historical and providing insight into how other provincial governments have grappled with these dynamics in education provision.

South African economic geography continues to be based on a few key economic metropoles around which larger peripheral industries and productive activities developed over time. These metropoles include Cape Town in the Western Cape and Johannesburg in Gauteng. Labour migration from rural dormitories was strictly controlled under apartheid, limiting black South Africans' mobility, with the result that post-1994, South Africa has undergone rapid cycles of urban migration to major economic centres (De Brauw et al., 2014; Hall & Posel, 2019; Mueller & Lee, 2014).). This has also been the result of declining standards in rural governance in certain provinces, where successive generations of limited social and economic development of rural and peri-urban areas has made them undesirable places for many families to live in permanently and for teachers and other professionals to work in (Ndlovu, 2020; Walker & Mathebula, 2020). Despite this, many black South Africans retain familial and cultural ties to these areas, indicating the importance of factoring migration and inter-provincial mobility into public planning.

It is indicative of the level of socio-geographic inequality in South Africa that Gauteng contributes 33% of the country's national economic output, which is more than the economic outputs of KwaZulu-Natal (15.9%) and the Western Cape (13.9%) combined (Statistics South Africa, 2023). This makes Gauteng a desirable place for parents and guardians to find work and to find schools for learners that better prepare them for work and further study.

However, it also creates pressure for the province to find more space to accommodate inbound learners, a challenge also encountered by schools in the Western Cape.

One of the positive aspects of schooling in these two provinces is their location at the nexus of major economic activities, which in Gauteng has been used to define educational-industrial 'corridors' to facilitate stronger links between schools, industry and employers. This initiative, known as 'schools of specialisation', is specifically targeted at well-performing schools in townships located within or along designated economic zones, with district and circuit officials working to develop and sustain the relationships between these schools and industry partners. The Acting Director for Curriculum Support in the province explained how this works in practice.

> *Ms Christodolou (GP Curriculum Support Acting Director): It will be quintile, one, two and three schools, most of them, not all of them. [We] actually identify schools that do not necessarily have admissions pressure, even though I must say once they become schools of specialisation, and they do very well, everybody wants their children to go and attend that particular school. But the initial criteria, you look at those schools that don't really have admission pressure [and are located in the townships]. The other thing is that the school should be doing very well in terms of learner performance… you cannot identify [schools of specialisation] where the learner performance is not good. We also look at the economic corridors or economic zones within the province… [so] you might say the school is a math, science, ICT school of specialisation with a focus on automotive… On the West Rand, for example, you'll find agriculture as well as maybe the mining sector being there, then you will find the school of specialisation could be an engineering school of specialisation [or] with a focus on agriculture. (FGD_GP_MTP_102024)*

By linking township schools to industrial or economic zones, the participants in the Gauteng provincial department sought to improve education quality and connect learners to future work and study opportunities that they may not have previously considered or had access to. It is notable that Ms Christodolou observed heightened parent interest in successful schools of specialisation, as it suggests that the initiative has had some impact on improving the prospects of learners attending these schools, making them more attractive over time. The province was also experimenting with school twinning, where a no-fee and fee-paying school are twinned to share resources and facilities, overseen by a joint SGB and a shared academic programme. These initiatives depended on fostering relationships between school communities to establish a mutual vision for teaching and learning quality, while also encouraging greater social cohesion across geographic and economic divides.

The close location to economic productivity has also been used to galvanise support from major local industrialists and their charitable foundations, as explained by the Head of Curriculum Support (HCS) in one of the Western Cape's rural districts.

> *Ms Porteus (WC HCS): I totally embraced the idea that government will not be able to solve all the problems of education, and therefore I reached out and I allowed people to come and see me… so I have, for all these years, always welcomed philanthropists and NGOs, in the primary science programme, as a teacher, and I worked with them as an advisor… I can see the data, I can see that not many learners [in] disadvantaged areas get the opportunity to offer those subjects at schools. So, I've started after-hours programmes to get learners involved, and also to train them so that they can actually be skilled, to be able to take up these subjects. So, we have music programmes, we have drama programmes, we have fine arts, developing the fine arts, and then also, to some extent, the dance. And all of that is NGOs that I find funding for through philanthropists, and then they run programmes for learners. (KII_WC_HCS_MsPorteus_102024)*

As a former subject advisor who later took up the role of Head of Curriculum Support for an entire district, Ms Porteus had a wealth of experience in leveraging community and corporate relationships to acquire resources for her schools, both as a practicing teacher and later as a middle-tier official. Ms Porteus also highlighted the effect of poverty on curriculum and teaching opportunities, recognising that many poor schools did not have the sports or cultural facilities to develop extramural programmes and introduce learners to a wider range of potential careers. From her initial experience as a practicing teacher, Ms Porteus maintained the view that onor support could be a crucial tool to offset the limited resources available from national government.

Mr Erasmus (former District Director in the Western Cape) further suggested that the nature of philanthropic relations in South Africa is a complex terrain involving actors within communities as well as larger organisations.

> *There [are] still are some very, very helpful NGOs that will go to the end of the world to assist us. South Africa is an interesting philanthropic community. It's not as sort of removed as it is in other parts of the world. You know, in terms of the projects that people do, where they locate themselves, there's always, a deep connection to community support. Yeah, if you look at the very, very small businesses within our communities... They will support the school during the holiday times with chips and sweets and things like that for the kids and just come and hand it out, or run a soup kitchen. The gogos will run a soup kitchen from their houses and just hand out. That was the kind of support that you will still get in the townships from the smaller, those who really can afford, they will still do that, and not even with us asking, they will come and say, look, we are prepared to come and do this and that. (KII_WC_RDD_MrErasmus_102024)*

This community-level support is important because it emphasises that even under what Mr Erasmus described as 'hazardous' levels of poverty, local actors came together to support schools, including providing meals to learners participating in holiday classes or other activities. While larger organisations provided technology, resources, training and development opportunities, localised interventions could address specific needs through

community stakeholders who knew learners' circumstances. As a former district director, Mr Erasmus indicated that this was a vital source of support for poorer schools which had fewer networks to draw on to run special programmes which required funding, time, space, and refreshments for teachers and learners during long days. Districts also oversaw discretionary funding applications from schools to the provincial government, which could be used to pay for specific programmes where necessary. At the same time, Mr Erasmus explained that district directors developed relationships with NGOs and charitable trusts that enabled them to approach these organisations to support specific schools or groups of schools that they knew were in need of further support.

It is perhaps notable that Ms Porteus and Mr Erasmus held a slightly different view to some of their colleagues in Kwazulu-Natal, who challenged the extra work required to fundraise for additional items; but it is also possible that this was a more acute responsibility to handle the more localised a respondent's role was. For example, school principals lost critical administrative and sometimes teaching time to their fundraising efforts, affecting their individual schools, whereas Ms Porteus, as a district-based divisional head, originally had a specific mandate to seek external support for her schools as part of her role as HCS. While this was removed from her formal job description, she still undertook this work as part of her stakeholder engagement responsibilities.

> *Ms Porteus (WC HCS): What is very interesting, because I've been in this for a long time, is that the job descriptions have changed for this particular post as we go along. There was a time where one of the key KRAs was to liaise with NGOs and other partners. That is no longer part of what is expected. It's not part of your job description anymore. With that, we also had a little budget as a head of curriculum to be able to do that, because you need to get around a cup of coffee, sit and plan and so on, and that, unfortunately, has also gone. I think the Department sees the benefit of liaising with community and philanthropists and NGOs, but they don't see how important it is. For me that's a vital role that we need to play, to help to expand the resources of government through these collaborations. (KII_WC_HCS_MsPorteus_102024)*

The South African government's approach to co-operative governance includes leveraging the capacity and resources of non-governmental and private sector organisations where necessary, and it is evident that this has filtered into the role requirements of senior middle-tier professionals who can use donor relationships to direct resources to schools in need. It is also likely that the high level of need in Kwazulu-Natal is a factor influencing the level of support that teachers and middle-tier professionals can mobilise in the region. While Gauteng has a quarter (25%) of the total national population and produces 33% of national economic output, Kwazulu-Natal is home to nearly 20% of the national population and produces just about 16% of national economic output (Statistics South Africa, 2023). The Western Cape has just over half of Kwazulu-Natal's population – 11.5% of the national total – but has a slightly higher economic output relative to its population size, at 13.9% (Statistics South Africa, 2023). KZN also has one of the highest numbers of no-fee schools nationally, suggesting that these provinces operate within quite different economic and socio-geographic constraints.

Internal differences between provinces are also key, with rural poverty and geographic distance being an issue for subject advisors in the Western Cape as well, but under different conditions. Compounding the challenge of reaching and attending to rural schools in the province was the prevalence of small schools with multi-grade classrooms. These are usually 'primary schools [in] farm areas where you don't have big communities, the classes are small, and therefore they don't qualify for each class to have a teacher. So, the teachers need to combine classes, and not everybody has skills to do that' (KII_WC_HCS_MsPorteus_102024).

This combining sometimes required a single teacher to teach across phases (e.g. Grade 3s (FP) and Grade 4s (IP) in one class), as well as accommodating multiple languages, learning needs and subjects. Specific programming was developed by the Western Cape provincial government, NGO and university partners to support strengthened teaching in multi-grade settings, but small schools continue to be an area of concern. This was a similar finding in Kwazulu-Natal, although participants did not specifically mention multi-grade schools or classrooms that they were aware of. Rather, the effects of internal and even school-to-school migration were such that smaller schools struggled to maintain the minimum post establishment required to function effectively and had to find alternative ways to supplement their teacher allocation, which may have included some form of multigrade teaching. Another method noted was principals in the study taking on additional teaching work to the detriment of their administrative and leadership responsibilities.

A dimension that cut across the relationship and institutional landscape was the lack of financial authority that principals have in no-fee schools and how this may undercut their ability to seek external support. Ms Madlingozi, the Mthethwa circuit manager, explained the challenges that arose in useful detail.

> *Ms Madlingozi (CM): The bulk of the fund is managed on their behalf, and [that] doesn't give you the necessary skills to manage funds properly [so] when you go to ask for funding somewhere else, people would want to know if you are capable of taking care of what they're going to allocate to you, and if you haven't been doing it, you can't start learning with the money you asked for… Schools will tell us, as circuit managers, 'Ma'am, look at the boxes. Last year, they sent me these boxes full of rulers that the learners are not using… I know, if I talk to my parents, they will afford to buy exercise books, I don't have to buy exercise books from the department, so that money for exercise books can assist us in getting other things that we need in order to enhance the teaching and learning in the classroom' but because you are not in control, you are told you have to order exercise books, so your money is being spent on your behalf, whereas if you were in control of the funds, you would be able to prioritise and fundraise, to take care of other things that parents can assist you with, and then divert the funds to do other projects that will enhance the teaching aids that you need in school. (KII_CM_MsMadlingozi_102024)*

*Ms Zikode (Pr): So the textbooks that we're supposed to order, this is the price. This is the limit. This is the maximum we can use. The stationery that's going to be delivered, this is the limit. We have an option [where] if we feel that we do have these textbooks for this year… [you] can replace textbooks with furniture. We are running short of furniture since we are a small school, we're growing, so we need more furniture. So, this year I didn't order any books. I just put the money in furniture. (KII_P_ChimamandaPrimary_092024)*

It is concerning that schools reported having excess learning and teaching support materials (LTSM) that they had no use for while lacking funds to attend to urgent priorities, particularly when this had the knock-on effect of undercutting principals' autonomy in being able to seek external support as well. While it is expected within national policy that allocations to no-fee schools are carefully managed to ensure adequate resourcing throughout the school year, in practice, this can be hamstrung by reduced per-learner subsidies to schools, late payments by provincial government or delays in procurement and requisition processes. Ms Zikode, principal at Chimamanda Primary School, said, 'I found a sponsor to come in and renovate the toilets, the condition is bad. I've been dealing with department for the past nine years for them to come and fix the toilets.' These backlogs contribute to declining school infrastructure over time as well as low morale among teachers and learners in no-fee schools. Moreover, they often result in schools with major safety hazards on-site, which, in South Africa, has resulted in several high-profile deaths of learners falling into pit toilets – a crude hangover of apartheid provisions to black schools (Odeku, 2022).

Another crucial dimension of the flows of autonomy and responsibility in the system relates to the role of the provincial government in allocating resources and operationalising the strategic priorities of the national and provincial departments. Participants in Kwazulu-Natal suggested that the subject advisors needed to be geographically and professionally closer to schools, especially those in need of additional support, and moreover that circuits should be more capacitated to facilitate relationship building and networking of schools, community agencies and potential support partners/donors.

## 6.2 Political influence(s) in governing education districts and circuits

In the absence of closer individual- or school-level connections to their employer and spheres of policy implementation, most teachers' primary collective mode of engagement with the national and provincial departments was through their teacher unions. This is conceptually problematic as effectively teachers rely on unions to address both labour and professional issues through collective bargaining, strike action and other activities, while teachers' professional registration and record of conduct is maintained by the South African Council for Educators (SACE). This conflation contributes to the antagonistic relationship that participants suggested exists between major teacher unions and the education departments.

Participants in Gauteng and the Western Cape indicated that working with unions was a particularly sensitive aspect of their work due to the interconnection between unions and political parties, which also contributed to distrust around reforms proposed by opposing organisations. Unions also play a critical role in supporting teachers in labour disputes and presenting the position of employees to national or provincial departments. When provincial governments had productive, professional relations with teacher unions, they were able to introduce reforms with union support, consolidating buy-in from teachers as a collective. In Gauteng, this included creating opportunities for unions to participate in shaping lesson observations of teachers by subject advisors – something otherwise rejected by many teachers given the country's history of punitive inspection.

> *Ms Kyengo (Prov. Director: TPD): If the policy only says the departmental head can get into the classroom to monitor what is happening in the classroom, what about a departmental head like myself who has no knowledge in all the other subjects that I am managing (within the STEM subject group). We did have a pilot with our teacher unions, where we piloted how we can make sure that the departmental heads collaborate with the subject facilitators in terms of monitoring application of the knowledge and skills acquired during the training onsite. (FGD_GP_MTP_102024)*

In her own experience as a departmental head, Ms Kyengo struggled to provide effective curriculum and instructional support to teachers of other subjects within her department, and she did not know how best to monitor teaching and learning quality. The pilot programme required careful balancing of school and teacher autonomy with teacher development and school improvement priorities: departmental heads worked with subject advisors to monitor teachers' progress and evaluate the extent to which they were absorbing the knowledge and skills gained from capacitation efforts and modelling these improvements in their teaching. Unions participated in the pilot and provided oversight and input to the process, adding an additional layer of protection for participants who may have otherwise feared its effect on their employment.

Teacher union influence could also extend beyond school-based reforms, as suggested by Mr Mashaba.

> *Mr Mashaba (Former District Director): The recruitment process of promotional posts has been much infiltrated by politics, unions being at the centre… when it comes to recruitment, the unions have an upper hand. Unions have become more powerful than the SGBs, if the union member wants to be appointed, either to be the principal, HOD or deputy principal… circuit manager, even up to director, even right up to head of that department. So that's one change, and [what] are the consequences of that? Because when one is managing a school, you should have experience. You should have proven yourself that you do have capacity, but now you find that someone can jump from level one or two, right up to level five, managing a big school without experience. (KII_R. CMC_MrMashaba_102024)*

Mr Mashaba's and other participants' claims were grounded in fact. In 2016, a ministerial report was released following a task team investigation into the phenomenon of 'cash for jobs', involving collusion between union and departmental officials. Teachers and prospective office-based officials identified positions – usually where the incumbent was due to retire or move to another post – and bribed known fixers within their unions to collude with departmental officials to rig the recruitment process in their favour (DBE, 2016). This could include intimidating potential candidates to drop out of the running. The report also found that this collusion was more likely in provinces where teachers belonged to one major union than where multiple unions were active. Moreover, a climate of fear surrounded the practice, given that the teachers and education professionals engaging in it were connected to powerful actors within unions. There was an evident perception that teachers feared the reprisals that could result from challenging unfair hiring practices, especially when it involved colleagues and school leaders (DBE, 2016).

Part of the reason for this challenge was friction between the powers granted to SGBs in policy and the realities of differential SGB capacity on the ground. Because SGBs oversee the recruitment and hiring of teachers within schools and make the final recommendation to the provincial head of department for approval, it is important that SGB members have the capacity and knowledge to make informed choices about school staffing. Where members – particularly parents – do not have this capacity, or are disempowered from exercising it, strong principals or union officials can step in to direct these processes in their favour, including forcing appointments that compromise teaching and learning quality. The increased wealth stratification in South African schools and intense rural-to-urban migration crystallises this challenge as slightly better-off parents and learners opt to go to schools elsewhere, pulling potentially vocal or influential parent voices and their resources away from local schools (Fataar, 2015). While it is critical that SGBs are capacitated to steer transparent and effective recruitment processes, this capacity is also deeply intertwined with economic advantage or the lack of it. This gives rise to the potential for school leadership or other actors to unfairly wield the considerable power that accompanies authority over a school and its personnel and service contracts, even within the constraints of no-fee schools' limited financial autonomy. It was evident from the participants in Kwazulu-Natal that interference by external interests at SGB level could be a hindrance to effective school governance.

The system-level challenge created by unfair hiring practices is apparent in the following explanation by Mr Mashaba, the former district director in the Queen Nandi district. At different levels, unqualified and/or underprepared appointees can compromise quality and effectiveness, creating additional gaps or widening existing capacity limitations within an already constrained system.

> *Mr Mashaba (Former District Director): This structure I explained [is based] on the assumption that it can only work when the right people [are appointed] to the right jobs. Unfortunately, things did not go that way. People who do not qualify, right from being chief education specialist down there, moved from lower ranks to higher positions, [and] they could not deliver. The arrangement, the boundaries and the structure are now falling down. Now if one is the chief education specialist for governance, and you know nothing about how to manage a school. What do you do? You do nothing. You don't know. Now imagine the Chief circuit manager doesn't know what to do. So, the whole thing is getting dismantled, such that now you will find that the chief education specialist is trying to work with 600 schools... You find the circuit managers who are saying, 'Do it yourself, I'm not the governance, I'm not the curriculum'. It's because they are not capacitated. (KII_R.CMC_MrMashaba_102024)*

Within education districts, this situation creates whole sub-units (whether circuits or clusters) in the system that lack dedicated instructional leadership and direction, with the exception of subject advisors and existing professional learning communities (PLCs) that may meet some of the developmental needs of teachers. It also means that other educational or social challenges in affected schools may be overlooked due to limited or compromised oversight mechanisms in place. In the interview with the principal and deputy of Uganda Primary, the participants spoke positively about the new provincial secretary of the major union in Kwazulu-Natal, who was a young woman taking a firmer line with uncooperative teachers and supporting greater accountability between stakeholders.

> *Mr Mthembu (Dep. Pr): I think now things are changing. Unions [are] more welcoming towards the officials, but I'm also aware they need to know what they are going to do to schools because some of them come to school without the aim of developing the teachers. The unions are not as troublesome as they used to be… [The new provincial leader] is pushing education. She said you should not be military, you should be revolutionary and academics. She does not defend teachers that are not doing their jobs. If you are not doing your job, she won't defend you.*

> *Ms Mdoda (Pr): Her stance is very clear on that… Even for us principals, she went and collaborated with UKZN and got the top brass from leadership and management to have a three-day workshop with us. That's how serious she is about education, and it was for principals, specifically for primary school and high schools. She's very passionate about education. She wants to see a shift in the education space, even with appointments. (KII_PDP_ UgandaPrimary_092024)*

This view was supported by Mr Erasmus (Former District Director), who argued that unions could also be vital partners in instituting reforms from the middle tier, by securing teachers' buy-in and engaging in their own complementary development sessions.

## 6.3 Cascading instructional leadership through the system: Challenges and successes

Under workable conditions, the responsibilities of instructional leadership are cascaded down from districts through the curriculum function (which oversees subject advisors) and the operation of circuits. Other divisions within provincial departments support the work of the instructional core within the system. Provincial governments articulate educational priorities based on national direction and their diverse contextual needs, and districts operationalise these priorities through closer administration and provision to schools. Subject advisors arrange workshops and individual development sessions for schools to facilitate improvement in problem areas, while circuit managers oversee the capacitation of school leaders and operational support and monitoring of schools.

In reality, the possibility for deep instructional leadership to permeate the system at all levels is undercut by equity and capacity gaps which erode quality governance in pockets of the middle tier while simultaneously creating school environments where the minimum conditions for teaching and learning are not met. The reproductive nature of South African inequality is such that without focused intervention and additional support, many schools simply do not currently have the capacity to deliver quality education (Jansen, 2019; Motala & Carel, 2019; Van der Berg et al., 2016).

This does not negate the efforts that instructional leaders in the system engage in to support curriculum delivery. At the provincial level, strategic planning informs the efforts of sub-levels and articulates the main priorities for teaching and learning. In the Western Cape, this focus was threefold, including foundational literacy and numeracy development, e-learning and teacher wellness. Some priorities were shared across provinces, such as Grade 12 support and Foundation Phase development, and provinces also had other priorities closely connected to their contextual demands. However, participants across provinces indicated that these priorities could be undermined by more urgent needs or budgetary constraints. In the case of e-learning, while the provincial government in the Western Cape recognised the importance of developing blended learning modalities given the lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic, development in this priority area was limited in practice as funding was redirected to, for example, placing additional learners arriving from other provinces. Additionally, while Grade 12 performance has always held critical importance within the system, Ms Porteus (WCED) explained that she was glad to see more professionals and system leaders taking an interest in strengthening the Foundation Phase. It was evident during the pandemic that learning losses were intensified by poor foundational preparation.

> *Ms Porteus (WC HCS): Since COVID, many of our learners have fallen way behind and for some kids, especially the Foundation Phase learners, because they were the last to actually [return] to school [after lockdown]... So, the development of the FP was at the lowest level - the research says about two, three years behind. The WCED started this very ambitious programme called the Back on Track program. So, this not only getting the learners back on track, but to look at a model that could improve education in general… The*

> *programme has selected schools, selected learners and selected teachers that form part of the programme. We have teachers up till this year, [in this] district about 50 teachers, that come out once every nine days, and then we train them, and then put them back in the school. So, all that they need to do for the next two weeks is then given to them in terms of the PowerPoint, in terms of resources, so they just need to go teach what is being developed, and that the development has been done by the advisors. So, it is the Grade 1, Grade 4, Grade 7, Grade 9 and, to some extent, the Grade 12 benefited from this programme. (KII_WC_HCS_MsPorteus_102024)*

The Back on Track programme focused on strategic points in the system: early Foundation and Intermediate Phase (Grades 1 and 4); the final year of primary schooling (Grade 7) and the final year of the GET band (Grade 9). Alongside supporting teachers to plan and deliver the curriculum, teachers were also able to draw on support from organisations such as Funda Wande, which oversaw reading and literacy development, and Green Shoots, which provides a digital platform for mathematics development, online learning and quizzes. The programme also allows up-to-date monitoring of learner and school performance in specific content areas, which subject advisors and district curriculum heads can use to further tailor the support they offer.

Gauteng and Kwazulu-Natal also had interventions targeted towards improving learning outcomes and 'catching up' to the grade or phase level required, which included interventions run through districts and circuits based on provincially designated focus areas. In Gauteng, strategic priorities also included foundational literacy and numeracy, though the province was also looking to consolidate ECD provision now that the ECD function forms part of the DBE's mandate. A programme to strengthen early-years capacity was also being flighted in the province, with teachers in Grade 3 spending an additional 30 minutes per week on improving reading and another 30 minutes on improving numeracy, supported by dedicated materials developed by subject advisors and the division for teacher development. The same offering was increased to 45 minutes in Grade 7 and Grade 9. Ms Kyengo, the head of teacher development, explained that:

> *Ms Kyengo (Prov. Director: TPD): [Our pilot] is like our other secondary school intervention programme. It's a learner support programme where we have additional tuition for our learners in the pilot schools. This year, we piloted in 50 schools [in Grade 8 and 9], and next year we're going to increase the number with about another 35 schools. Obviously, it's a bit cost intensive, so we're keeping the pilot for now at just less than 100 schools. But the reason why we're having it in [grade] 8 and 9 is because we know once the learners leave primary schools at the end of Grade 7, when they get into Grade 8 and 9, you see a very big drop in terms of learner performance. So, we are supporting these learners during a holiday walk-in camp programme. In fact, this year we had it every Saturday. Next year, we will probably only have it during vacation periods because of the cost of the pilot. And we want to learn from that pilot and then move towards full scale implementation, so that's at [Grade] 8 and 9 level. (FGD_MTP_GPD_102024)*

For the Gauteng middle-tier professionals, the major strategic pillars for the provincial department were 1) promoting quality education and 2) changing the landscape of education in the province through combining targeted curriculum and teaching interventions with the right support to make these interventions effective. This can be seen in the school twinning programme, where improving quality accompanies combining two discrete school communities from different socio-economic backgrounds to foster greater social cohesion and begin to unravel the hardened inequalities in schooling quality that enable some learners to thrive and constrain others from succeeding. Moreover, as Ms Kyengo explained, the teacher development function at the district and provincial levels was a crucial partner in supporting the proliferation of instructional leadership within the system. A separate directorate exists to capacitate office-based educators.

> *Ms Kyengo (Prov. Director: TPD): It is to ensure that whatever training that is provided to the school-based educators, curriculum support structures at provincial level, curriculum support structures at district level, that is, your subject facilitators… that they are orientated on what content knowledge teachers will be trained on, what assessments, what teaching methodologies teachers would be trained on. We normally have mediation [training-the-trainers] sessions with the subject facilitators on these so that when they go and provide onsite support to the schools, they know exactly what teachers have been trained on [and their role] is to monitor and support the application of the knowledge and skills acquired by the teachers during the training. That is why we take it upon ourselves to say before teachers receive training, we mediate what teachers should be trained on so that subject facilitators and any other curriculum support structure could be able to go to schools and monitor the application of the knowledge and skills acquired by the teachers during the training. But importantly, we also work with the research directorate headed by director Grace. We also work with the monitoring and evaluation directorate headed by director Avela Dandala… in terms of monitoring, evaluating and supporting the impact of the training programmes. We have developed a monitoring, evaluation and support framework, to bring everybody on board in terms of monitoring, evaluating and supporting the implementation of the knowledge and skills acquired during our training programmes so that they translate into the desired behavioral change in the classroom and the eventual enhanced learner performance that we are all aiming at. (FGD_GP_MTP_102024)*

Ms Kyengo emphasised that teacher development was meaningless without having actual impact in terms of improving teacher practices and subsequently strengthening learning outcomes. This goes against the idea of 'development for development's sake' without effective monitoring and foregrounds the connection between high-level strategic priorities in the system and the details of support and professional capacitation provided to different professionals within it. Shared tools such as digital dashboards assisted middle-tier professionals with tracking teachers', schools' and subject advisors' activities. Subject advisors were also subdivided by Classification of Educational Subject Matter (CESM) at

the provincial and district levels, across the different provinces. At minimum, they were supervised by GET and FET coordinators alongside coordinators for e.g. commerce subjects, sciences, arts subjects and languages. These coordinators managed curriculum facilitation for subject advisors as well as the professional development they required specific to their specialisations. Moreover, in the GET band, subject advisors provided support in all the subjects offered, and as Ms Porteus argued previously, this led to quality issues when teachers and subject advisors were not evenly capacitated across subject areas. This was, however, an opportunity to draw on skilled teachers or other professionals to support others: in an example from Kwazulu-Natal, Ms Madlingozi was able to identify experienced science, mathematics or robotics teachers to lead curriculum improvement sessions for groups of teachers and also provide relevant classroom-based feedback to the middle-tier professionals. In the Western Cape, Ms Porteus cultivated extensive relationships with academics, companies and NGOs enabling her to access practitioners and facilitators to run free sessions for middle-tier staff, principals or teachers.

Much of the instructional and curriculum support provided to teachers and schools was tailored to subjects and phases, but participants also noted the value of general sessions on topics such as fostering a culture of learning, managing discipline issues and effective planning. Some dedicated programming was also made available to induct newly qualified teachers into the system and provide them with transitional support in their initial entry into the profession. However, this support could not alleviate knowledge and practice gaps inherited from teacher education programmes, an issue Ms Philani (subject advisor) raised as a key challenge facing schools and education officials.

> *Ms Philani (SA): For some of the teachers that are joining the department, you find that they were trained through correspondence, so they were working… and did their teaching courses [through UNISA] and you find that the teaching practice was not properly done. So, you find that when they're at school, it's completely different from how they were actually trained, [and] the methodologies really are lacking. (KII_SA_MsPhilani_112024)*

Teacher induction has emerged as a critical lever in strengthening the transition of student teachers into the profession and would benefit from more rigorous design and embedding into the first three years of newly qualified teachers' practice. According to its website, the University of South Africa (UNISA) is responsible for the training of nearly 50% of all South African teachers[4], meaning that a significant proportion of teachers in the country receive their qualifications through distance learning. It is critical for early-career support to recognise and respond to differences in teacher preparation given that these differences may further contribute to challenges in teaching and learning.

There were still significant gaps that participants identified as barriers to successful articulation of learners through the system. This can be visually captured as a 'valley' in instructional support and capacity development across phases. Participants in all three provinces made some note of this issue in the course of data collection.

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4   College of Education: About the college. https://www.unisa.ac.za/sites/corporate/default/Colleges/Education/About-the-college
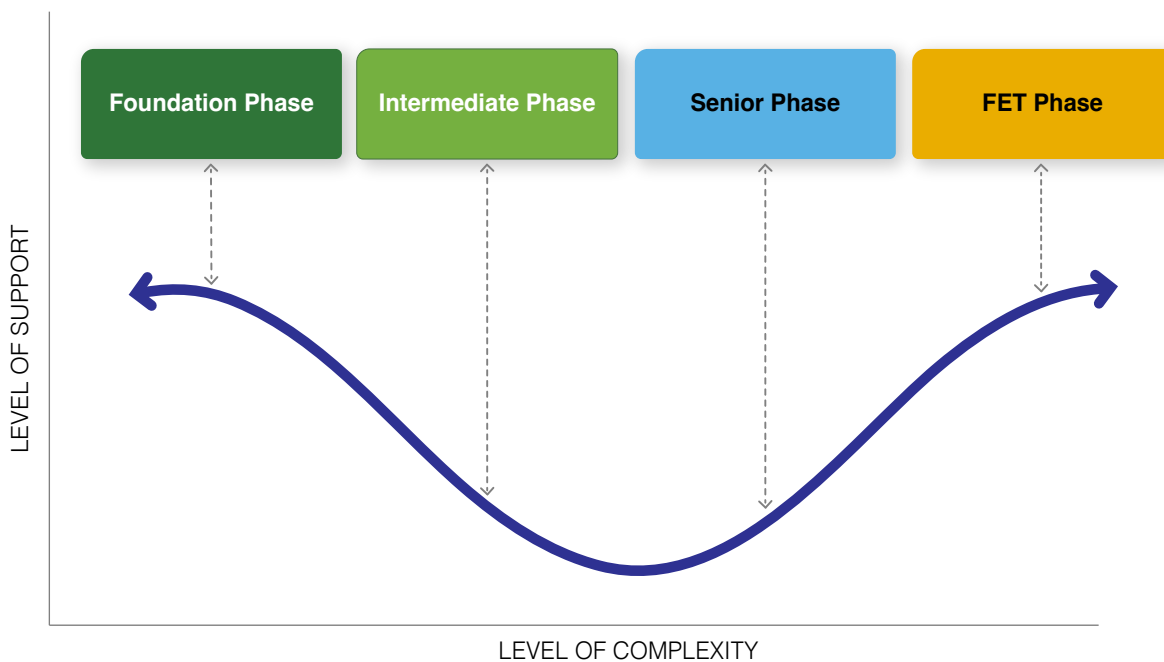
*Figure 6: TPD provision over successive phases (conceptual diagram)*

The Foundation Phase is an essential area of targeted support because of the critical developmental and cognitive milestones that learners are required to meet in order to progress and adjust to successively higher levels of learning complexity. The incorporation of ECD into the national department's mandate forms part of efforts to create greater cohesion between early-years preparation and the Foundation Phase in order to strengthen language development, problem-solving and logic, and spatial and contextual understanding. As participants have noted, achieving these aims can sometimes be constrained by the challenges of accommodating diverse learning needs and levels of language proficiency within one class, which are exacerbated in larger classrooms. In this way, learners may not develop the necessary foundational skills in both their home languages and the first additional language (which differs by province) to successfully transition to the Intermediate Phase from Grades 4 to 7. The transition to the Intermediate Phase includes the introduction of the second language and additional subjects such as science and technology, increasing the complexity for learners. Teachers also need to be capacitated to support learners to make the cognitive transition to a higher level of complexity, which may at times mean actually pausing curriculum delivery to focus on procedural learning. In a study of a philanthropic private school servicing underprivileged learners, Cooper et al. (2021) found that teachers instituted a bridging course for Grades 3 and 4 to support their transition in literacy and numeracy, using 15 to 30 minutes every morning to focus with learners on specific skills in these areas before continuing with scheduled teaching. This required teachers in both phases to collaborate to diagnose learning gaps and develop a shared programme of support and flexibility on the part of school management to allow for changes in the scheduled learning programme.

However, several participants in this research suggested that by the Intermediate Phase, gaps started to emerge in the kind of support they received from the middle-tier and other

actors in the system. Teachers had to teach a more sophisticated and broader curriculum to learners, with discipline issues also growing as learners got older. Teachers themselves were differentially qualified to teach within this phase and also needed support to teach vertically complex subjects such as natural science and mathematics. Findings from Venkat & Spaull (2015, 121) based on the 2007 Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ) study, indicated that at that time, 79% of South African Grade 6 mathematics teachers 'showed content knowledge levels below the grade 6/7 band'. As found by Pretorius and Spaull (2022), learning gaps carried over from the Foundation Phase can progressively widen at higher phase levels if teachers cannot effectively address these gaps immediately as they are encountered. The further learners progress, the harder it becomes to resolve these gaps. This situation is additionally complicated by the current grade progression and promotion policy in South Africa, which allows for a learner to be failed only once within a phase before they must be promoted to the next phase. Participants challenged this policy for worsening the problem of ineffective preparation and creating grounds for progressed learners to refuse to participate in class, knowing that they could not be held back more than once. Progressed learners were also older than the majority of their classmates and could sometimes intensify existing authority and disciplinary challenges for teachers, who needed to act pastorally and as educators in their navigation of classrooms beset by these dynamics.

These challenges accumulate at Senior Phase level (Grade 7 to 9) as learners transition from primary schools to high schools. The subject load also increases from six subjects to nine, increasing the cognitive demand on learners and requiring teachers to be able to support their academic development alongside the cultivation of general but complex competencies, including planning, time-management and examination skills. In mathematics, learners also take on a progressively higher load from year to year of more complex content fields such as geometry and algebra. Teacher capacity in these areas is a significant challenge and affects the depth of learning that can occur at this level but should also be understood in relation to the schooling context and the cumulative nature of individual learning gaps over time. Moreover, subject advisor support within this phase was described as particularly constrained in the Kwazulu-Natal research context and seemed to be a function of the limited resources available to hire more advisors as well as the failure to fill available posts. For their part, subject advisors were able to draw on support from colleagues in other districts and could supplement their own skills by collaborating with peers to direct specific support towards schools, but these efforts were limited by ever-present constraints on the time available to attend to all the schools under their authority.

Compulsory basic education ends in Grade 9, and learners are legally allowed to exit the schooling system to continue their education elsewhere, such as at Further Education and Training (FET) colleges, which offer technical and vocational qualifications equivalent to a Grade 12 certificate. This is a significant period of drop-out or early exit in the system, with the current South African dropout rate at around 50% overall (Roman et al., 2022). The reasons for early exit are multiple and can include lack of funds or familial support for further schooling, menstrual poverty and gender-based violence in schools, negative peer or social influences, pressure to enter the workforce, and negative schooling experiences

over time (Hartnack, 2017; Roman et al., 2022; Weybright et al., 2017). Weybright et al. (2017) and Roman et al. (2022) further argued that psychosocial drivers of early exit should also be considered, given that low motivation, self-esteem and self-efficacy are contributing factors to the eventual decision to exit. For learners from impoverished backgrounds, the multiple deprivations that shape their schooling experiences can also negatively impact their motivation (Roman et al., 2022). In a study of Grade 9 and 11 learners in two districts in the Western Cape, Roman et al. (2022) found that intent to drop out was higher among learners from poorer schools and was regularly influenced by difficult home circumstances, feeling incapable of coping with the curriculum, teacher or peer bullying or exclusion, and negative self-perception. While not all learners acted on their intention to drop out, it is striking that the decision to do so often resulted from a longer process of detachment and disengagement that was influenced by both school-based and external factors.

If learners do not exit at the end of the Senior Phase and continue to the FET Phase, the subject load reduces from nine to seven as learners choose at least three content subjects to offer alongside a compulsory core of home language and first additional language, mathematics or mathematical literacy, and life orientation. This period also prepares learners for potential progression to higher education, which is determined by their Grade 12 performance. The pressure is high for teachers and learners to consolidate, improve or catch up in this phase in order to achieve both individual and subject or school targets in the NSC examinations. As participants indicated, massive resources are invested into support programmes for teachers and learners. These include weekend classes, holiday programmes, subject-specific exam preparation sessions, and intensive breakaway study opportunities to give learners intensive learning time and on-site support. Similar breakaway periods were arranged by the school in Cooper et al.'s (2021) research, with teachers explaining that these trips offered learners secure, quiet study space, protection from community- or home-based disruptions, regular meals, and more individualised support from teachers and assistants on-site.
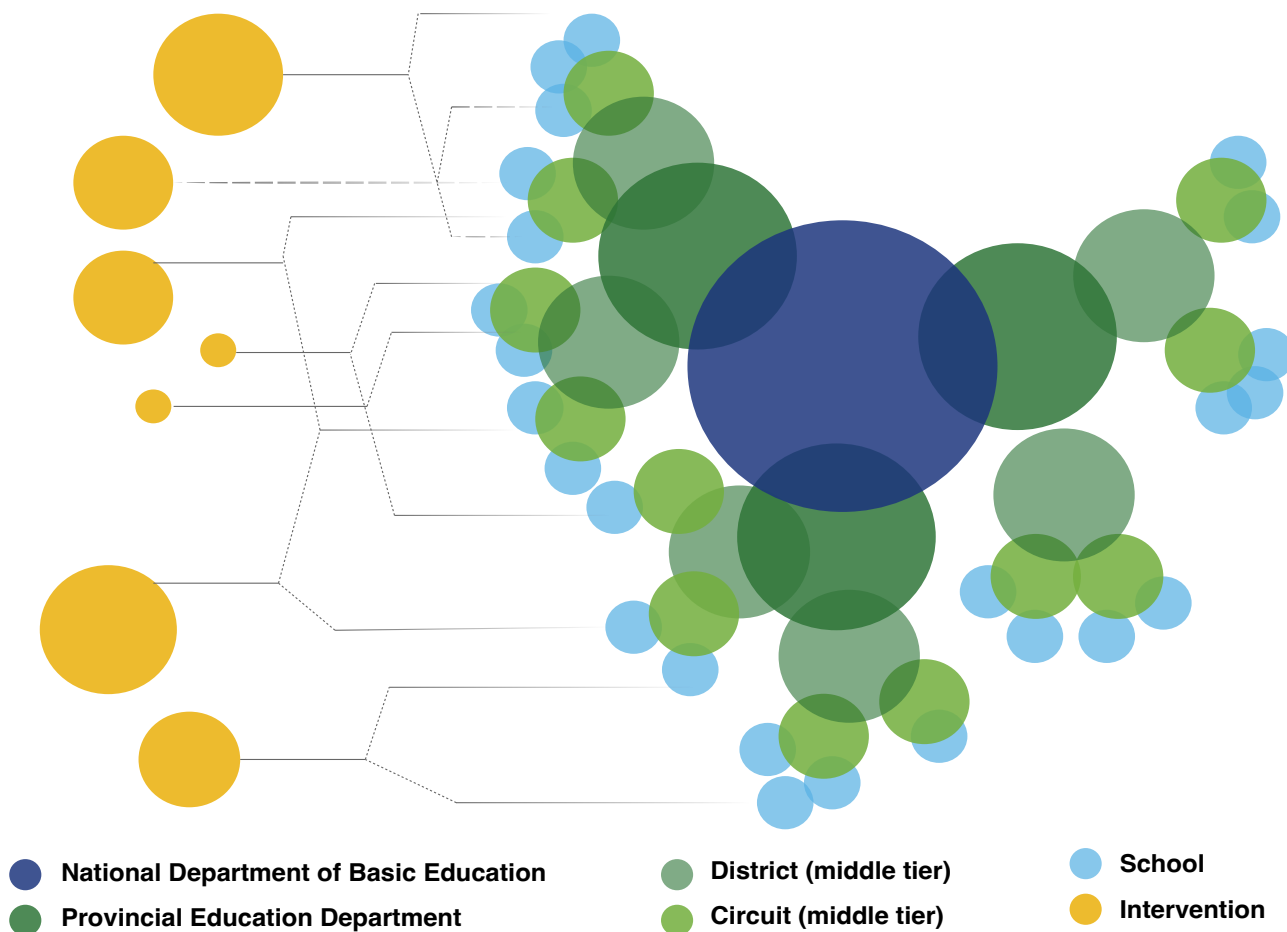
Teacher development is also a critical component of exam preparation, and subject advisors further assist teachers and schools with planning for periodic and mock assessments, interpreting learner performance data, and arranging specialised support within the school and connecting to potential opportunities outside of it. Participants who had taught in high schools, such as Mr Mthembu (Uganda Primary), suggested that teachers were also more willing to participate in these developmental offerings because learner performance and potential improvement reflected back on their efforts to improve their own practices. However, a deep challenge besets the system at this level because of the high percentage of early exit. Many learners do not have the opportunity to benefit from this support, and those who do may have amassed learning gaps that cannot be successfully or adequately resolved by this stage for learners to achieve at levels comparable to their peers in more well-resourced and –supported environments.

# 7 | Conclusion and recommendations

## 7.1 Conclusion

This research set out to understand how middle-tier actors support and influence school leader and teachers' practices in struggling primary schools. Drawing on the existing knowledge base and analytical framework informed by LGI and IIEP's forthcoming publication, empirical data collection was designed to elicit an understanding of which middle tier practices are effective in supporting education delivery and management and teaching and learning in schools, as well as which institutional barriers and enablers impact the role of the middle-tier in providing these types of support. The discussion of the findings has drawn together insights from several provinces in South Africa, grounded within a case study of KwaZulu-Natal, a province experiencing a particularly high level of school poverty. Analysis of the data provided examples of both **successes and challenges with the practices of the middle tier and the support they provide to schools**. It also demonstrated a complex landscape of institutional and contextual constraints that interact to impact the sup**port provided by middle-tier professionals, including both managerial and instructional responsibilities**. In this section we summarize some of the key insight emerging from this research.

*Figure 7: Diffuse nature of middle-tier roles*



- National Department of Basic Education
- Provincial Education Department
- District (middle tier)
- Circuit (middle tier)
- School
- Intervention

**Figure 7 captures the complex nature of middle-tier roles in South Africa in greater detail than the traditional top-down description of them**. As demonstrated, schools can be subjected to multiple interventions, of varying size and scope, alongside the middle-tier support that cascades from provincial level outwards. Interventions and their providers can also operate across multiple provinces and implementation sites, as well as be responsible for implementation at more than one level (such as capacitating schools and circuits), further complicating an understanding of what interventions exist in the system and what they intend to achieve.

The figure also highlights **how distant schools can become from the instructional centre at national and provincial levels**; the checkered circles on the right-hand side visually depict how the porousness of weak provincial and middle-tier structures can further undercut schools' alignment to national priorities by disconnecting them from their main sources of information and instructional support. **Rather than being a smooth top-down process cascading from level to level, instructional support for teachers is refracted outwards, through a series of authoritative and material spheres in the system, each with its own localised and institutional dynamics and challenges**.

Thus while schools, institutions and divisions within the system are developing greater clarity on the management and operational structures that constitute the education system, they are also being drawn into a demanding reporting regime that prioritises what can be measured, tracked and reported – motivating a compliance-driven approach where teachers, schools and principals may not have the capacity to rigorously engage with improvement and development indicators. At the same time, longstanding priorities such as early-years literacy and numeracy, and NSC (Grade 12) preparation, are beginning to compete with newer, cross-cutting instructional demands and needs in the system. This includes changes to language-in-education policy – which affects the instructional support needed in primary schools – and efforts to streamline the current curriculum towards academic, technical and vocational education and employment pathways. **Subject advisors thus need to have specialised knowledge within and across phases, as well as of the general content area they are responsible for, and the subjects housed within it. Moreover, their instructional and curriculum support also needs to be relevant enough to support teachers to address challenges such as multi-grade or overcrowded classrooms, managing the academic timetable in the context of other school services such as daily nutrition** (which can take an additional hour or more from the school day) (Cooper et al 2019), and providing alternatives to homework where this is a deterrent to regular learner participation.

This research took place in KwaZulu-Natal which represents one of the poorest provinces in terms of proportion of no-fee schools to overall school numbers. This poverty is a challenge middle-tier professionals in other provinces also deal with on a daily basis. **The nature of South African inequality is such that even pockets of prosperity are closely surrounded by large areas of deprivation, scarce economic opportunities, and limited sources of social and community support**. This increases the workload of the middle tier, e.g. subject advisors, who need to afford greater priority to struggling schools and priority subjects given they may not have the time or resources to meet the needs of all the

schools within their ambit. **To compensate for these gaps, subject advisors institute virtual engagements, such as through WhatsApp groups, and support teachers and schools to set up professional learning communities to strengthen school-based professional development**.

Operational capacity is a major reality confronting middle-tier professionals and the schools they work with, filtering throughout the system. A challenge identified by participants in this study is that **subject advisors** do not necessarily possess equivalent standards of knowledge across the learning areas allocated to them, based on their own teaching experiences, and therefore **need capacity development to be able to effectively support teachers and departmental heads across different subjects and levels**. Subject advisor training is provided through districts, which oversee the training of trainers, but participants indicated that much of the support provided at this level is based on some form of 'cascade' model that relies on successive translation by officials from middle tier to schools. If a weak link exists in this process – such as an underqualified subject advisor being expected to provide important workshopping on curriculum changes to departmental heads – the effects can be disastrous. Participants in Khoza's (2019) doctoral research in one South African district described returning from curriculum reform sessions 'more confused' than before, because sometimes the facilitators of these sessions were less qualified than the teachers they were meant to support, with the result that teachers had to work together or train themselves to adapt to new reforms.

**Resourcing and personnel shortages affect the capacity of the middle-tier to operate effectively**. Critical posts remain unfilled in the participating provinces, with leadership posts (such as circuit managers) sometimes prioritised over curriculum and instructional support roles, particularly in the context of budgetary constraints, furthering the tension between education management and instructional leadership demands.

Principals in the KwaZulu-Natal case study noted that the circuit manager, Ms Madlingozi, provided them with professional development for both curriculum leadership and school management, but was forced by demand to focus mainly on poorly performing schools. Ms Madlingozi similarly indicated that while coaching of principals was part of her role, there was limited time available for monitoring and following up, which minimised the substantive impact this could have on principals, who also need the pastoral dimension of this form of professional support.

**Provincial strategic planning also influences the opportunities made available to the middle tier and to schools**, and district officials in the Western Cape and Gauteng emphasised the **value of using effective networking and sponsorship opportunities to direct additional support towards schools in need**. However, these opportunities are also constrained by the cost of provision, such that scaling them sometimes means scaling back on some of the high-impact activities and inputs that teachers find most useful. It also makes schools vulnerable to more than one potential source of resourcing shock. When support or development interventions end – sometimes abruptly due to funding limitations – it is not widespread for these to conclude with a comprehensive step-down or close-out process to recondition the school to cope without that specific input. Greater middle-tier oversight

and leadership support is needed to enable principals to manage these relationships and their potential effects to the greatest benefit of their schools' primary mandate of teaching and learning. The participants in this research described a contemporary schooling context where multiple constraints act upon school and middle-tier settings, resulting in creative and ad hoc approaches to meeting urgent priorities. While this entrepreneurialism is admirable and filtered into the work of school principals and sometimes teachers as well, it means an ongoing lack of consistency, causing uncertainty in resourcing over time and redirection of principals' and middle-tier leaders' efforts towards tasks such as fundraising and networking.

This leads to the issue of **capacity development**, specifically how **different gaps in capacity development across stakeholders intensify challenges encountered by school and middle-tier actors**. Principals' managerial and leadership development is one dimension of current capacity gaps, which also includes understanding financial decision-making by the province in terms of setting norms and determining schools' individual allocations, and having the knowledge to query issues affecting their schools' financial health. Participants also suggested that SGBs need deeper on-boarding and training support in order to provide schools with meaningful, constructive oversight on governance issues. Without this, governing bodies can become de facto autocracies overseen by powerful principals and/ or strong teacher factions. Effective policy communication and education is a crucial part of providing school stakeholders with the tools to understand decision-making, abuses of power and sources of recourse, and in a sense forms part of the joint instructional leadership responsibilities of school leaders and middle-tier professionals towards the communities they serve. With parent participation being a consistent challenge in many under-resourced schools, it is evident that new approaches to seeking stakeholder buy-in are needed that focus on the development of shared interest and commitment as a precursor to more effective management.

**Teacher professional development** was a key focus of the research, particularly forms of support offered by middle-tier actors and how these supports influenced changes in teachers' practices. It was evident from the data collected that the quality, length of training and monitoring of professional development activities influenced how effective these opportunities were in fostering positive changes. Quality issues included the capacity and disposition of facilitators, the availability of learning resources and opportunities for reflection and discussion within training sessions, and the relevance of topics and content to teachers' daily work. Relevance was also an issue flagged in relation to some of the workshops and sessions hosted by subject advisors and circuit managers (for principals). At times, teachers attended sessions where the focus was either too generalist or too narrowly primed towards a specific grade or subject within phase-based sessions. In a different scenario, teachers were provided with Annual Teaching Plan outlines that underestimated the time required to pitch and cover content in larger classes, causing them to run out of time and eventually re-plan for their own contexts. This became frustrating over time as teacher participants were not reimbursed for travel to development sessions, nor were they regularly consulted on the content of the support provided to them. They also noted that workshops and training events were regularly scheduled during school time, leaving learners to be monitored by volunteers or parents and thus not engaged in the planned teaching for the day. These were issues that

required greater coordination between school-, community- and middle-tier-based actors to resolve.

This is compounded by the limited reach that schools have to the subject advisors responsible for their professional and curriculum development. **Several participants suggested that subject advisors be circuit-, not district-based, though recognising this would require a significant injection of capacity at the circuit level**. Participants' responses indicated the importance of instructional support being more localised, especially in regions affected by large distances and with schools challenged by limited resources for travel. Without this, subject advisors have fewer opportunities to catch issues before they encroach on teaching and learning quality. When they were able to identify these issues, the solutions that subject advisors and circuit managers developed were both creative and cost-effective. This includes the example of swapping teachers within a school to allow a more experienced teacher to work with a struggling grade or preventing schools from swapping teachers too often to allow for effective capacity development to occur.

**Teachers acknowledged the constraints that middle-tier professionals were working within, and solutions such as WhatsApp group chats allowed for closer, quicker communication with subject advisors, for example**. This was also important because many subject advisors had limited time for school visits, and WhatsApp became a useful stopgap. It was not, however, an effective replacement for extended time spent in schools, especially because the number of subject advisor visits reported by participants varied from once to up to four times per year per school. Schools that were performing at an acceptable standard received fewer visits so that advisors could focus on underperforming schools, which are legally compelled to participate in additional teacher and learner support activities. This does not mean that all of the schools considered 'acceptable' were actually performing optimally, but that they were at least not in need of mandatory intervention. **Teachers considered the lack of subject advisor support to be particularly frustrating because in no-fee schools, this is often the main form of additional instructional support they receive outside of activities with principals or departmental heads**. Subject advisors also provide essential monitoring and feedback to teachers, assisting them with diagnosing learning challenges through interpreting their performance and assessment data. While WhatsApp groups could be effective spaces to ask questions, share knowledge, resources, feedback and ideas, these did not offer subject advisors the necessary view into schools and the effect of teacher practices on learner engagement and learning outcomes. Rather, these groups served as a bridge to connect subject advisors to the teachers they worked with, allowing for faster engagement and resolution of day-to-day challenges.

**Monitoring and feedback** was one gap that KwaZulu-Natal-based participants identified in the support offered to them, although that gap was offset by the Peppertree intervention and its wraparound development model. Effective and collaborative monitoring – including teachers, departmental heads, subject advisors and principals – can help ensure transparency in reporting down the line. For example, Ms Madlingozi, the Mthethwa circuit manager, indicated several cases of teachers or principals changing learners' marks to raise school performance statistics.

Other forms of undue interference mentioned by research participants include pressurising poorly performing learners to exit early or move to another school (Machingambi, 2012). This suggests that **there are important school-based drivers of early learner exit that should be considered in the framing of support provided to school communities, teachers and learners**. Safe, supportive school environments can a preventative measure against other negative influences in learners' lives, particularly if their home communities are sites where violence, crime and deep poverty have produced successive layers of social and material instability (Cooper et al., 2021; Machingambi, 2012). Specific provision is made within education personnel administration for the hiring of education professionals including psychologists, occupational therapists and counsellors, but these roles are affected by similar capacity challenges to those encountered in the middle tier. No-fee schools thus regularly lose teaching and learning time to the additional pastoral care that learners need, such as meals and psychosocial support (Cooper et al., 2021).

**Agential middle-tier professionals in the research leveraged relationships to draw additional resources to schools in need**. They also found external sources of expertise and support to arrange additional and more targeted professional development opportunities for teachers and principals to supplement the development provided within the system by schools, subject advisors and middle-tier structures. Knowledge-sharing was an important part of middle-tier professionals' capacity development of school-based staff as this also provided a baseline source of information and direction from the employer on teachers' terms of employment, curriculum and pedagogy issues and innovations, education on policy to improve understanding of the core policies affecting their work. While teachers did not enjoy professional development that took the form of one-way information transmission, they highly valued the information made available to them, although at least one middle-tier participant commented that a better approach could be found to avoid overwhelming teachers with 'information overload'.

Given the significant **gap in evidence on women in leadership in education**, this research also considered the role of gender in middle-tier professionals' leadership and management approaches and experiences in the field as well as institutional influences, such as barriers and support to taking up and holding leadership positions.  The four principals participating in the qualitative data collection were women, and their reflections highlighted the role of mentorship and encouragement by fellow colleagues in their eventual decision to pursue further leadership development and apply for leadership roles. Middle-tier participants in the three provinces indicated that there was continuous support for women to apply for leadership positions, and funding was also ring-fenced for this purpose, with one of the MTPs in the Western Cape also seeking out undergraduate women interns to groom into future middle-tier roles. Gender and race tended to intersect in participants' experiences of challenges in their professional journeys; in one middle-tier professional's  example, working with previously segregated schools as a woman of colour sometimes resulted in attacks on her qualifications, capacity or seniority to do her job. However, over time, women participants indicated that they were able to cultivate relationships of mutual respect and trust with sometimes resistant stakeholders.

These participants were also supportive of there being more women leading high schools in the future. While it is more common in post-apartheid South Africa to find women as principals of primary schools, principals of high schools tend to be men, and one participant indicated that this is based on the misconception that women are not strict enough to manage older students. Although it is true that many high schools are confronted by crime, gangsterism, substance abuse and other negative influences that stakeholders might assume require heroic, 'Big Man-style' leadership, strong leadership includes the support network that principals are able to create among staff, parents and the local community. As women leaders reflected on their personal journeys, a common thread emerged of collaborative, entrepreneurial and service-based approaches to leadership that leverage the skills and talents that others bring to the table; that rely on more, not less, delegation and development of mutual trust; and that thrive through open communication and constructive feedback. Women participants expressed the importance of being open about the things they did not know at different stages of their journeys and actively sought help where they felt the need.

This research study has taken place at a particular juncture in the evolution of South African provincial education systems. To our knowledge, this study breaks new ground in explicitly applying a middle-tier conceptual framework to analyse the relations between districts, circuits, and schools, through a case study - with a comparative dimension - of one of the nine South African provincial education ministries. In this sense, the project is also exploratory in approach and, as a consequence, points to a range of questions and issues that can be taken up by future research. A number of recommendations are presented in the following section. These consider the contextual constraints within the system at present and the levers of change that may unlock improvements in middle-tier support across their instructional leadership and management responsibilities.

The trajectory of the middle tier as part of the post-apartheid non-racial education system is relatively short, because amalgamation of the various apartheid education structures into a single structure took place less than 30 years ago. This account of a provincial middle tier, seen from the perspective of a circuit within a district, signifies that whilst progress has been made, there are shortfalls and fragmentation that require further support and developmental work in terms of capacity and infrastructural, financial, operational and information systems. Alongside this development, greater knowledge-sharing and transparency around policy implementation would support creating real networks of collaboration and shared investment in school improvement. Within the time and resources applied - ab initio - to form, develop, support and embed a new non-discriminatory, capacitated and unified middle tier, could there be middle-tier features that are less mature than others at this point? Tournier et al. (2023,20) observe how 'impact can grow as the middle tier becomes more established and mature'.

The South African education governance configuration presents an important comparative dimension – that of inter-provincial research – that could be framed, for instance, to deepen understanding of within- and between-province middle-tier professional arrangements and activities, and perhaps to support collaboration towards provincial alignment of middle-tier systems.

## 7.2 Recommendations for policy, practice and further research

Based on the findings from the literature review and primary research undertaken for this study, a set of recommendations are presented for the middle-tier and then for the national level, to take account of the potential policy and other enabling conditions that may be needed to secure participation and cooperation between provinces on common matters relating to middle tier issues.  Considerations for future research are also included.

### 7.2.1 Recommendations for the middle tier

The recommendations for this section are structured by the four high level priority areas for the middle tier as defined by the DBE and presented earlier in the report. These roles are 1) support, 2) planning, 3) oversight and monitoring and 4) public engagement (NDE,2024). These areas are all covered by the analytical framework used for this research which looks at middle tier responsibilities across teaching and learning and education management.

**Support the middle tier provides**

1.  Curriculum strengthening through multi-faceted inputs. District: At district level it is essential to develop strategies that prioritise resource allocation such as literacy and numeracy materials aligned with policy changes; Prioritise bilingual resource development by arranging for sustained engagement between teachers and language and teacher education institutions; Arrange for workshops on bilingual teaching strategies in the circuits. Circuit: Monitor implementation at school level and address gaps in teacher skills regarding bilingual and numeracy teaching; Work with principals and teachers to align classroom practices with curriculum goals.

2.  Findings from the KZN component of the research emphasised the importance of **developing targeted support materials and related training to bridge the gap between Foundation and Intermediate Phases**, to allow for learners to transition smoothly and improve learning continuity with limited adjustment difficulties/challenges. District: Promote district-wide understanding of learning gaps and their cumulative effects; Introduce district-level procedures to identify early learning deficits; Develop and recommend a focused remediation programme between grades 3 and 4; Review learner performance on a regular cycle. Circuit: Tailor the district remediation plan for learners' contexts and implement this with regular monitoring of remedial programming.

3.  **Leverage youth development and teacher assistantship initiatives**. In South Africa this includes the Presidential Youth Empowerment Scheme, which specifically includes young people transitioning into the workplace, as well as internship schemes for trainee or prospective teachers to work in schools. These programmes have the potential to support improved teaching and learning in poorer communities through funding and deploying interested youth to act as school and teaching assistants for a designated period. District: Apply for and align the intake of youth development initiatives with district goals and school needs; Liaise with and facilitate partnerships between funders, NGOs

and schools to sustain and expand these programmes to identified schools in need of support. Circuit: Identify priority schools for assistantship and mentorship placements; Facilitate integration of these programmes in schools to generate alignment with curriculum goals.

4. **Foster inter-school relationships for collaboration and sharing of resources** to improve learning outcomes and stronger community support with reduced expenses. District: Connect schools through facilitating communication, articulating collaboration parameters, and coordinating the collaboration; Provide school principals with guidance and support for the partnership; Oversee planning and logistics for resource-sharing. Circuit: Encourage the formation of peer support groups between potential or active partner schools; facilitate the distribution of resources between schools and develop protocols for resource sharing, co-teaching and/or co-learning, grievance management and step-down processes; ensure schools comply with the national and provincial educational policies; monitor the progress of collaborations.

5. **Ensure training delivered by middle tier professionals is based on evidence of what works** including being relevant to the context, as close to school based as possible and includes follow up and monitoring.

6. **Empower principals with financial autonomy and training to enable them to effectively manage the funds and resources allocated to their schools**. This would benefit from greater middle-tier steering and support for navigating sound financial management and adhering to departmental policies on procurement and personnel management. District: Provide financial training and support to school principals; offer guidance to principals on financial procedures; allocate financial resources to schools; assist and guide principals in grant acquisition. Circuits: Facilitate localised financial management training, provide support to principals and monitoring of their financial management practices; advocate for the financial needs of the schools and serve as liaison between the district office and schools; monitor resource utilization.

## Planning

**Streamline and formalise funder/donor-school relationships** by developing standardised, secure contracts for relevant parties and designing seamless processes between schools, circuits and districts to facilitate financial transactions.

7. **Implement more flexible and responsive funding access for no-fee schools** so that they can club together to improve buying power, negotiate better prices and enable principals/school governing bodies to responsibly source funds at times outside of regulated schedule of quarterly fund release.

## Oversight and responsibility by the middle tier

**Define transparent accountability mechanisms**; regularly undertake monitoring and evaluation; secure compliance with policy; encourage data-driven approaches to decision-making and analysing school performance.

8. **Support professional development and collaboration**; school leadership development and educator development and promote collaboration between school leaders and teachers through clusters.

9. **Promote** equity related to resource allocation and access to positions.

## Public engagement by middle tier officials

10. **Encourage parent involvement**: Circuits: encourage parents' participation in School Governing Body activities, participation in discussion of school performance in the area. participation in cultural activities such as school choirs, sports events, open days, school field trips and extracurricular activities, volunteering- participation in school meals programs

11. **Facilitate community engagement to strengthen support systems for schools**. Circuit: organise regular meetings with community leaders, local companies also civil society bodies; participating in school improvement projects

12. **Strengthen policy engagement, clarity and alignment**. District: Develop policy resources tailored to educators' needs; Coordinate organised interactive workshops to explain key policy changes. Circuit: Engage with principals to ensure they are prepared and equipped to effectively communicate policy changes to teachers; Monitor whether policy changes impact on classroom practices and school operations.

## 7.2.2 National level recommendations

13. **Improve professional development for middle tier roles** such as subject advisors so they can be more effective in their role. The professional development should incorporate subject knowledge, instructional practices and be relevant for the everyday realities that schools face.

14. **Align policy priorities and incentives** so that middle tier professionals focus on implementing the policy priorities such as foundational learning.

15. **Consider how to provide more circuit-based instructional support** and/or continue to harness technology so that the support is more localised and closer to the schools.

16. **Implement highly valued teacher professional development opportunities** that involve interactive engagement rather than information transmission.

17. **Establish separate channels for engagement between teachers, unions and education departments for clearer communication and reduced conflict**.

18. **Introduce a research program**, jointly developed by senior representatives from all nine provinces, to explore the comparative dimension of Circuit and District processes, structures and relationships with a view to identifying examples of sustainable good practices for possible implementation across provinces.

## 7.2.3 Considerations for future research on the middle-tier

This study clearly illustrates **that contextual factors** – including political, socio-economic and geographic issues - can significantly influence the support provided to schools by the middle tier. For example, this study showed that political interference can influence middle tier capacity and functioning – such as teacher union influence on hiring individuals who might not be qualified for middle tier positions. This is an area where there is very little evidence and future research should seriously consider exploring how this and other contextual factors (cultural, historical, etc.) shape the institutional context and practices of the middle tier. As is the case in South Africa, it is important to acknowledge that national-level categorisations of schools (such as into wealth quintiles) can mask disparities at local levels. Therefore, it is critical to explore localised dimensions of inequality and other contextual factors.

While the **institutional factors** that surfaced in this study are not surprising, they are understudied and there is limited evidence to understand how they can best be addressed. A few areas relating to the institutional context for future research to consider include:

- How the structure of the middle tier – which roles exist at different levels of the system and where they are based geographically -- influences the access and quality of professional development for teachers and school's leaders.

- How the middle tier addresses gaps in their own resources and capacity – such as through technology and peer learning communities – and the limitations of these approaches.

- What policies and incentives are in place that might inadvertently drive middle-tier practices, such as the South African policy prioritisation of Grade 12

In South Africa, future research could consider LGI and UNESCO IIEP's recent work on institutional barriers to leveraging the middle tier and the **use of a capacity assessment tool to better understand bottlenecks and opportunities within the education system**.

In terms of **middle-tier practices to support schools**, this study found that both instructional leadership and management support are critical. Potential areas of inquiry for future study that surfaced in this work include:

- How the middle tier can ensure communication and alignment of priorities across different educational levels.

- How the middle tier can address teacher knowledge and practice gaps inherited from teacher education programmes.

- Given the primary role school leaders play in teacher professional development, how the middle tier can strengthen support for school leaders.

- The quality of support and induction, including mentoring, that recently appointed teachers have access to in their school and district as well as the ongoing continuing professional development, including that provided by NGO and community organisations. This will allow middle tier actors to better understand what gaps exist and which are being filled.

- The role that the middle tier can play in facilitating school partnerships with external actors, including funders and NGOs.

- The role of the middle tier in supporting schools to establish additional and flexible funding mechanisms to help meet resource gaps.

Finally, there is a significant gap in understanding the barriers faced by women in the middle tier of education systems. This includes the challenges in developing a pipeline of female leaders, starting from the school level. **Further investigation of the impact of policies and practices to support female leaders at the middle tier should be undertaken, especially around existing approaches such as peer support networks**.

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