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An Analysis of the Support Roles and Responsibilities of Circuit Managers to Principals during Transformation in the South African Basic Education System

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the study was to analyze the support roles and responsibilities of Circuit Managers' (CM) as middle tier managers to principals during education change in South Africa. Change management theories were used as theoretical frameworks to underpin this study. Using semistructured individual interviews data was collected from four CM and thirteen secondary school principals. Principals expressed that they are not effectively nor adequately supported within their specific challenging context by the Circuit Manager that is appointed to support them during education change. The study reveals that CM dictate more time toward administrative obligations and mostly assume accountability and responsibility for tasks outside of their purview or job description. Principals who are not effectively supported by CM find it difficult to provide quality leadership and management during education change as well as ensure school improvement. Change strategies are recommended for CM's, districts and stakeholders in the basic education system.

Introduction

Changes in South Africa are ever evolving and have affected a variety of organizational and leadership structures in the Department of Basic Education (DBE), Provincial Education Departments (PED), and districts (Heystek, 2016; Naiker & Mestry, 2015). Significant changes in the leadership, management, governance, report structures, widening of education districts, and democratized curriculum within the South African education system have taken place since the dawn of democracy in South Africa (Department of Basic Education [DBE], 2005, 2012). Circuit Managers (CMs) in the South African basic education system are synonymous with superintendents in the United States of America and inspectors in the United Kingdom school system (Chingara, 2019). They have similar roles and responsibilities in many aspects which is to guide, support, and manage principals and schools in districts and states. The Circuit Manager (CM) operates within the "middle tier" of management structures within education districts in South Africa, or regional levels of education systems in European and Western world countries. The CM fulfills the complex area positioned between schools and government-level policymaking. CM are therefore the primary link between education district, provincial department, principals, and schools (Department of Basic Education, 2013, 2015; Ndlovu, 2018). It may differ from country to country, depending on the country's size and administrative setup, political approach, level of system (de)centralization, and breadth of mandate (Tournier, Chimier, & Jones, 2023). The middle-tier workforce typically comprises a wide range of professionals with planning, management as well as pedagogical support functions and can include school professionals

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who have stepped up to offer leadership and support to principals and schools. Middle tier management in this case CMs are in direct contact with the schools, and simultaneously they are regarded as the representatives of schools as well as the practitioners to the provincial and government ministry level. CMs play a key role in enhancing quality education in the basic education system and ensure that all processes and procedures comply with policies and legislation (Childress, Chimier, Jones, Page, & Tournier, 2020). Tournier et al. (2023) states that, “As intermediaries in systems, middle tier actors are responsible for implementing and monitoring national education policy at the local level. When empowered to do so, they can drive the entire system by leading from the middle.” Without proper *middle tier* support principals fail in managing, leading, and implementing education change especially when they do not have sufficient resources and are overburdened with administrative duties and external interference through union and political agendas.

Since 1994, CMs and principals alike have continuously reported some level of challenges, stress, frustration, and confusion while leading and managing schools during education change (Bantwini & Moorosi, 2018b; Fourie, 2018; Heystek, 2016). These challenges were exacerbated by the world health pandemic (COVID-19). For example, not only have CMs and principals been tasked with complying with their leadership and management roles and responsibilities as outlined in policies (DBE, 2013, 2015), they are expected to do much more than what their job description entails (Chingara, 2019; Myende, Ncwane, & Bhengu, 2020). According to the DBE policy (DBE, 2013, p. 26), CM roles are to provide a channel of communication between the district office and education institutions; provide management support to education institutions; provide administrative services to education institutions; facilitate training for principals, School Management Teams, and School Governing Body members; monitor the functionality of education institutions; provide curriculum support to grade practitioners and teachers; facilitate visits of specialist district teams to schools; and report to district offices. These roles are what is expected of a CM when appointed in the position as education leader to support principals in their day-to-day management of a school. It was found that principals and CMs dictate more time toward administrative obligations and expectations from national, provincial, and districts especially during the COVID-19 pandemic as they had to continuously report on staff, students’ health, and health protocols implemented at schools (Bantwini & Moorosi, 2018a; Myende et al., 2020; Van der Voort & Wood, 2016; World Health Organisation, 2020). The roles as outlined in the DBE (2013) policy, the departments’ expectations due to the evolving nature of education change and the COVID-19 pandemic has a strenuous effect on how the CMs execute their roles and responsibilities. CMs must ensure that principals have the necessary resources and support from district units and Provincial Education Departments (PEDs) to effectively deal with education change within their specific context.

Although CM as middle tier managers and principals experience increased levels of uncertainty, stress, anxiety, and frustration during education change, it is not something new within the global and South African education context (Bantwini & Moorosi, 2018a; Childress et al., 2020; Howard, O’Brien, Kay, & O’Rourke, 2019; McDonald, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic magnified and exposed the underbelly of the stressors and uncertainties the CMs experience which they have continuously need to deal with (Myende et al., 2020; Ngozo & Mtantato, 2018). These factors have had a negative impact on the support role and responsibilities of CMs to effectively and adequately support principals in various challenging contexts. A world-wide pandemic as we experienced through COVID-19 is not a common or regular crisis that countries have to deal with. However, a pandemic like COVID-19 is unique as it continuously mutates, evolves and is ongoing in nature and contributes to continuous educational change (Reid, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic and continuous forced changes within the Basic Education system are detrimental to the leadership and management support role and responsibilities of CMs in providing sustainable support to principals in dealing with education change as well as the success of their own leadership and management well-being. As CMs lack the necessary support from education districts, and they do not have the resources to execute the additional responsibilities (Batwinin & Moroosi, 2018a; Chingagara, 2019). Given all that is asked of CMs, it is important that we analyze their support

roles and responsibilities in relation to the challenging context they have to provide support to principals in their specific challenging context. This line of enquiry is important because how CMs support principals during education change influence their effectiveness as education leaders and supervisors of principals as well as the performance of principals and schools in their care.

The research question, *what are the support roles and responsibilities of Circuit Managers to principals during education change?* directed the purpose of the study, to analyze and comprehend the specific roles and responsibilities that CM must execute to sustain effective support to principals in different challenging context during education change.

The study was underpinned by Lewin's theory of change and action (three-step change model) which forces any organization to adequately plan change, implement change (forced change) with the necessary support to enable sustained change (Husian, Akram, Haider, Hussain, & Ali, 2018), and Deming's (2018) theory of organizational change management which encapsulates different steps for effective organizational change (Gogue, 2005). Although many change models are used during organization change since 1951, Deming and Fullan's organizational change approach was selected as the best suited to address the changes CM and principals face. The change models assisted the researchers to investigate critical factors in organizational change to finally develop a support framework to guide CMs in supporting principals within different challenging context during education change. When people and organizations seek to execute change, it is important that those who implement change and those who will undergo change, understand what the relationship is between people to bring about sustainable change for improvement. When principals are not effectively supported by CMs during education change, principals find it difficult to manage their school, implement education change to provide sustainable teaching and learning practices.

The analysis distinguishes the conditions in which CMs as middle tier management in education district structures are supporting principals during education change and the challenges both CMs and principals face during a time of education change. The authors elaborate on what the change strategies that CMs as principal's supervisors could implement to support principals in different challenging context. Findings reinforce the importance of the support roles and responsibilities of CMs, superintendents and principal supervisors as *middle tier management* to schools during education change.

Literature Review

During the process of ongoing education transformation, principals and schools rely more and more on the CMs to effectively execute their roles and responsibilities to ensure that education change leads to sustained school improvement. CMs must ensure that principals have the required human and physical resources to implement and sustain change and ensure that all processes and procedures comply with policies and legislation (Department of Basic Education [DBE], 2013; Ncwane, 2019; Ndlovu, 2018). The roles and responsibilities of the CM are challenging, complex, time intensive, and most of the time unpredictable due to the often-unrealistic expectations from different basic education structures and the way transformation and the pandemic have caused numerous education changes within the basic education system (Bantwini & Moorosi, 2018a; Myende et al., 2020).

Changes within the South Africa Education System

According to Deming (2018, p. 117) change is "a conscious endeavour to alter the status quo by influencing or modifying the functions, structure, technology, and purpose of an organization." In light of this statement, Deming continued by saying that how change is executed and communicated inside an organization or system determines its likelihood of success. Since the nation's democratization, South Africa's educational system has seen numerous critical changes. The South African government reorganized the educational system throughout the school reform procedures, dividing it into two distinct education departments in 2012 (DBE, 2005, 2012). The Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), which oversees tertiary, further education and training (FET)

institutions, whereas the Department of Basic Education (DBE), which is primarily in charge of elementary and secondary schools and adult basic education training centers and institutions, further education, vocational, and training institutions (Department of Basic Education [DBE], 2020a).

As in most democracies, the basic educational system then underwent continuous modifications, and the roles and responsibilities of the CM within the basic educational structure were also directly impacted. Social, economic, cultural, and political factors all had an impact on the much-needed transformation. The democratic government has been forced to reconstruct the fundamental education system in order to adapt to and effectively address national needs and democracy to eradicate any traces of the previous political regime in South Africa (Mc Lennan, Muller, Orkin, & Robertson, 2018; Morrison, 2013; Naicker & Mestry, 2016). Government's primary aim for forced change was to diminish all traces of apartheid and colonialism as well as to provide equal education to all race groups in South Africa. The restructuring of education, which included the creation of the nine provincial departments sub-divided into education district boundaries and the implementation of standardized national curriculum to support "*education for all*" led to significant transformation. Organizational report structures, and difficulties like servicing poor, remote black communities in the so-called "whites only" education system has caused a lot of pressure on provincial education departments. These pressures tasked PEDs to provide essential services to the previously neglected schools, education districts, and CM (Bantwini & Moorosi, 2018b; DBE, 2013; Myende et al., 2020). Since 1994, South Africa has experienced significant change in population numbers, demography, and district size. However, there is still evidence that South Africa has long-standing substantial school infrastructure backlogs as a result of the political discrepancies of the past, particularly in impoverished and rural areas occupied by black populations (Jansen, 2004; Moloi, 2014). These backlogs are the result of numerous circumstances which include the previous "apartheid" government's decision to allocate much more funding and support to Model C "white only" schools than it did to the so called "black" township and rural schools (Bhengu & Myende, 2016). The beforementioned was the main purpose of the forced education change initiative of the 1994 democratic elected South African government. Unfortunately, the forced education change has brought many uncertainties due to lack of appropriate planning and support.

Fullan (2006a, 2009a) states that change is a conflict between the situation or existing condition and the intended one and careful planning and support is critical within a system if change is going to be sustainable and successful. The explicit educational changes since 1994 that took place included the integration of all race group schools into the basic education, the inclusion of formerly underprivileged "black, colored, Indian" schools, changes to education structures, the nationalization of the curriculum, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Circuit Managers as Education Leaders and Managers

Due to South Africa's lengthy history as a British colony, the CMs' role – previously known as school inspector during the apartheid system – was influenced by British educational practices (Chingara, 2019). The Department of Basic Education's Policy on the Organization role and responsibilities of the education districts (DBE, 2013) states that the CM as education leader is in charge of conducting school visits and managing and evaluating the performance of the principal and school using the quality management system (QMS) and the nine key focus areas of the whole school evaluation process that have been established by the basic education system since 2001 (DBE, 2001, 2015). The CM as education leader and manager in the South African education structure is similar to that of the school inspector in the British education system, and even after 29 years of democracy and numerous formal endeavors by the democratic government to reform education, British influence can still be seen in the CM support roles and responsibilities (Mafuwane & Pitsoe, 2014; Ncwane, 2019). The South African government finds it difficult to eliminate all traces of colonialism and western world influences on education structures and school curriculum. Therefore, the CM roles and responsibilities remains aligned toward inspection and compliance rather than support.

Circuit Managers' Direct Support Roles, Responsibilities during Change

COVID-19 has affected all aspects of human work, well-being, personal health, and a tremendous impact on world economies. The work of CM and principals have always been time consuming and consisted of unanticipated challenges during education change. Many of these characteristics have intensified over the past decade and specifically during COVID-19 pandemic. Although principals have continuously reported that they do not receive the necessary support from districts and its officials during education change (Bantwini & Moorosi, 2018b; eNews Channel Africa [NCA], 2020; Koko, 2020; McDonald, 2020), the COVID-19 health crisis has exacerbated the challenges they face without the expected and essential support from districts (Kaul, Comstock, & Simon, 2021). CMs as the closest contact point between education districts and principals are obligated to sufficiently support principals and schools in dealing with challenges during education change (Department of Education [DoE], 2018a; Van der Voort & Wood, 2016). Therefore, the CM's role has developed and extended into the cornerstone for efficient and long-lasting educational transformation and improvement in education systems. CMs are now required more than ever to work closely with schools, therefore intentionally forcing CMs to handle more responsibilities and increased expectation, for which they are often unprepared or trained for by the Department of Education (Bantwini & Moorosi, 2018a, 2018b; Mafuwane & Pitsoe, 2014). Education change has forced districts and provincial education departments to cascade more of their own responsibilities to the CM due to the overburdening of administrative expectation caused by continuous change like politics, economy as well as COVID-19. Meaning that, in the new basic education structure, CMs are compelled to service more schools as district boundaries expanded, which lead to taking on a more isolated role in ensuring that schools perform well, as when in the past, district units worked more closely together with less schools to care for to achieve success. As during apartheid, CMs still have to support principals in leading schools and provide oversight of the curriculum, ensure that teachers and principals receive ongoing professional development and context relevant support during the process of educational change while having limited resources (Mthembu, 2014; Ncwane, 2019; Nkambule & Amsterdam, 2018). These additional responsibilities are an administrative nightmare, and as a result, many CM are now overburdened, overwhelmed and are finding it challenging to support principals effectively.

More information on what is expected of CM and how they are surviving with the workload and expectations from various structures has been revealed during the COVID-19 pandemic (Gabster, Peterson, van Daalen, Dhatt, & Barry, 2020; McDonald, 2020). Principals and schools are directly impacted when CM are overburdened and do not provide the needed context relevant support to principals and schools (Ndlovu, 2018; Van der Voort & Wood, 2016). In addition to this, education change during the past 10 years has disrupted the delivery of CM support due to poor financial management, education funds allocation to schools, political unpredictability, and union influence (Bantwini & Moorosi, 2018b; Mafuwane & Pitsoe, 2014). During COVID-19 principals and schools had to rely more on the district for support, resources, and health measures (eNCA, 2020a). Regardless of continuous education changes and extra mandated modifications brought on by the COVID-19 epidemic, CMs in their extended roles are still being held accountable for the performance of principals and school with or without the necessary district support. The DBE still expect improved through-put rate from schools irrespective of the additional pressure and workload caused by COVID-19, for example, CMs had to ensure the implementation of health protocols and the reporting on the health status of staff and learners while they still had their existing day-to-day responsibilities. CM also had to ensure that principals implemented alternative modes of delivery (teaching and learning techniques) in their schools while schools were forced to close (DBE, 2013; Gabster et al., 2020; Kaul et al., 2021; McDonald, Bantwini, & Moorosi, 2018b). Thus, not only during extreme crisis's such as the pandemic any changes to be implemented in education to ensure transformation adds to the roles and responsibilities of CMs which is not stipulated in policies or legislations. The total number of schools they are responsible for in their circuit are increasing and the appointment of additional CMs to districts is often disrupted or delayed by political and union interferences.

Due to demands from districts, the DBE as well as the PED's and the workload of CMs in the current education system, the roles and responsibilities of CMs are continuously expanding. This causes their work to be increasingly challenging, complex, stressful, and demanding during education change. Sustainable education change requires resources which do not reach CMs or schools in time to effectively implement or address education change. The delay in required resources is mostly due to structural, political, and bureaucratic red tape.

Shift in Accountability Throughout Education Change

The emphasis on accountability and responsibility for learner performance has shifted from being shared by PED's, district offices, and schools by placing the CM and the principal at the heart of providing quality education to learners (Ncwane, 2019). This shift of responsibility is mostly caused by political, union influence and a lack of funding by government to effectively implement education change. As CMs are seen as the district officials responsible for handling various aspects of resource provision, provision of a quality curriculum while ensuring compliance in a constantly changing education system it remains a mammoth task to do with all the additional workload they have. These expectations have forced CMs and principals to make important decisions about how schools are managed and how resources are allocated to support educational change in the school (Ehren, Paterson, & Baxter, 2020; Howard et al., 2019). Lack of support and communication between the education system and political or union intervention is a common source of the shift in accountability to the CMs.

Principals' Perception of Circuit Managers' Ability to Provide Effective Support

According to research, CMs frequently lack the necessary knowledge, skills, and competence to assist principals during education change because many of them lack prior principal or management experience in the field of education leadership and school management (Ndlovu, 2018; Van der Voort & Wood, 2016). Often CMs are cadre appointments for political reasons (Batwini & Moorosi, 2018a) meaning that, "*The appointment by a government's governing party of a loyalist to an institution, as a means of enhancing public reporting-lines and ensuring that the institution stays true to the mandate of the party as elected by voters*" (Kotze, 2023, p. 2). The cadre deployment policy has been implemented by the African National Congress (ANC), and its alliance partners in pursuit of its avowed intention to have loyal party hands on all the levers of power in government. The ANC's policy has attracted criticism from those who believe that its implementation has been exposed to abuse by some ANC officials. While certain deployed cadres in public administration are able to function at an acceptable level, it is argued that in some instances far too many are there to do the bidding of the cadre deployment committee that appointed them to national, provincial, or local-level positions (Kotze, 2023).

In addition, the difficulties to provide effective and sustainable support by CMs to principals include a lack of educational resources, geopolitics that affect how educators and specifically principals are appointed to manage schools in difficult times and how teaching and learning are carried out in classrooms while emphasis must remain on compliance. Furthermore, the education system lacks the financing and resources that the globalization of education requires, which has an adverse effect on the support that CMs offers to principals and schools. Due to these factors that inhibit CMs, the accountability with the administrative workload of CMs and principals have increased, and the task is made even more challenging by the lack of district, provincial, and national department support and development in dealing with education change (Bantwini & Diko, 2011; Björk, Browne-Ferrigno, & Kowalski, 2014; Diko, Haupt, & Molefe, 2011). If education districts do not support CM in their efforts to guide and support principals and schools, the quality and availability of education will deteriorate even further.

Research Problem

The problem that the researchers investigated in education districts within South Africa is that principals express their concern that they are not sufficiently supported by CM to deal with education change especially where schools lack the resources and staff are required to accommodate more learners and provide quality education (Department of Basic Education, 2013; Morrison, 2013; Mouton, Louw, & Strydom, 2012; Wallace Foundation, 2013). Principals expressed that they are not effectively nor adequately supported within their specific challenging context by the CM that is appointed to support them during education change, this was particularly evident during COVID-19 (Gabster et al., 2020; McDonald, 2020). CM should ensure that principals and schools have the necessary resources they need to deal with changes in the education system, yet they are unable to acquire the resources they need to properly carry out their support function and commitments, as they encounter several challenges that are beyond their mandate, jurisdiction, or control (Bantwini & Moorosi, 2018b; Myende et al., 2020; Tanveer, Balz, Sumari, Shan, & Tanveer, 2020; Van der Voort & Wood, 2016). It was important to understand that the direct support roles and responsibilities of the CM are limited by barriers, such as a unionized educational environment and political interference, the lack of timeous resources and support provision by districts, PEDs and the DBE which contributes to the overburdening of CMs to effectively support principals in specific context and during education change. In agreement with Bottery (2016), Van der Voort and Wood (2016) and Heystek (2016) district officials rarely visit schools and that many of them are inadequate when it comes to carrying out their commitments to principals.

The purpose of the study was to understand and analyze the direct support roles and responsibilities of CMs to principals during times of education change in two education districts in South Africa and to recommend to CMs and districts on how to improve the support roles and responsibilities of CMs to principals to sustain the required transformation. The researchers sought to delve deeper into the contextual meaning of the support function from the experiences of CMs and principals through in-depth individual interviews with the chosen participants. The aims of the study were; to determine the support role and responsibilities of CMs to principals during education change, to explore the experiences, expectations, and needs of school principals within their specific challenging context pertaining to the support provided by CMs during education change. Thereafter, the researcher made recommendations that can be implemented by CMs to ensure the effective and sustainable execution of their roles and responsibilities to support principals during education change.

Methods and Design

The researcher used a qualitative approach with a phenomenological research strategy, embedded in an interpretive paradigm (Leedy & Ormrod, 2014). Phenomenological research looks at participants' perceptions and experiences of a phenomenon (Leedy & Ormrod, 2014, p. 7). The researcher explored the participants' lived experience and perceptions of how CMs can effectively execute their roles and responsibilities to support principals during education change to form a common understanding thereof. A phenomenological strategy of inquiry was relevant as it is especially suitable for small-scale research (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018, p. 447) and enabled the researcher to collect data from the participants. The article draws upon data gathered from a qualitative study which was conducted between 2020 and 2022 that entailed the direct support roles and responsibilities of CMs to principals and schools during education change. The study was exploratory and descriptive in nature and allowed the researchers to examine, analyze, document, and describe the direct support role and responsibilities of CM in two education districts in South Africa. CMs were purposefully selected for participation because education change and specifically COVID-19 had affected their leadership and management roles and responsibilities toward providing context relevant support to principals during education change. Principals were also purposefully selected to provide insight of their experiences of CMs' support within their specific challenging context during education change. Employing

a qualitative interpretive method allowed the researchers through semi-structured individual interviews to interact with participants and interpret their experience in the world they live in. The researchers examined the participants' actual experiences in order to comprehend how CMs may effectively carry out their support roles and obligations to principals in challenging context and throughout times of education change. The researchers' use of the phenomenological mode of inquiry enabled them to make recommendations for CMs to carry out their responsibilities in aiding principals within different challenging context and specifically during education change. Understanding the participant's thoughts and ideas and grasping a particular phenomenon required the capacity to approach the phenomenon from a fresh perspective, as if it was for the first time, through the eyes of the participants who have direct, immediate experience with it (Thomas, 2017). The phenomenological method of analysis allowed for the identification of the participant's unique experiences, expectations, and needs in regard to the support role and responsibilities of CMs to principals within different challenging context and specifically during educational change. To express and explain how the study's objectives were to be realized, the researchers had to follow a specific research methodology.

Participants, Population, and Sampling

The researchers requested and obtained ethical clearance to conduct the research from the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Education of the North-West University, South Africa. An ethical clearance number NWU-01016-21-A2 for the research was provided. The researcher abided to all regulations regarding research and health protocols as set out by the university. Permission was also requested from the Education Director General of the Gauteng Department of Education as well as the respective directors of the selected districts to conduct the study in the relevant circuits and schools. All participants signed the required consent documentation. The researchers used an unbiased district authority in each district to choose participants. The independent authorities carefully selected participants (CM and principals) in education districts with specific characteristics that fit the researched phenomenon in order to build a sample large enough but with the rich data required for the research. CM (1–4) represent the circuit managers, P (1–13) presents the principals in the coding. A total of 17 semi-structured interviews were conducted with four CM and thirteen principals of secondary schools across the two districts. CM with at least 2 years and principals with at least 5 years in their respective leadership positions were selected. Approximately two-thirds of the participants represented black or colored citizens and the other third white. Thirteen participants were male and four females. At least one quantile school between (1–5) were represented in the sample. Quantile classification (1–5) of schools is determined by the level of funding received from government, for example, Q (1–3) is non-fee-paying schools – full funding received by government. Q (4–5) are fee paying schools therefore limited funding received from government. Learners must pay school fees in Q4 and Q5. From the above, it is clear that the participants represented a wide range of quantile 1 to 5 schools. Including all quantile schools in the study provided a realistic view of what challenges CM and principals face, and what support is needed to deal with education change specifically within the different context in which CM have to support principals.

Data Analysis

The interpretive paradigm that underpins the data analysis for this qualitative study was to explore the “symbolic content” of the qualitative information acquired (Nieuwenhuis, 2020, p. 123). The researchers made use of content analysis which is a research tool to determine the presence of certain words, themes, or concepts within some given qualitative data. The researchers analyzed the 17 interviews from an interpretative viewpoint. The principals were coded from P (1–13) to ensure confidentiality. The selection of principals from different quantile schools enriched the data as they have different challenges they face during education change. This method of data collection allowed for the recording

of observations made during the interviews in the form of field notes, which were also included in the transcribed data files, in order to expand the depth of the data collected (Gill & Baillie, 2018; Palinkas et al., 2015). The information was meticulously examined and divided into topic groupings using coding standards according to Nieuwenhuis (2020, p. 126). Large amounts of unstructured text data were used to record the opinions, attitudes, and remarks of CMs and principals regarding the support roles and responsibilities of CMs to principals during educational change (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018, p. 645). The CMs were coded from CM (1–4) and the District Areas that presented the two districts were respectively presented by DA (1 and 2) to ensure confidentiality. Using content analysis, labels (codes) were developed to categorize the data into meaningful groups that could be evaluated and understood (Blair, 2015; Moser & Korstjens, 2018). As a result, the current study's data analysis method of choice was an inductive approach using content analysis. The researchers used ATLAS.ti, a data analysis program, to code transcripts. ATLAS.ti is a data management system that is very helpful for huge projects or ones that demand for the cross-analysis of aspects, such demographics, to specific codes (Stuckey, 2015). Despite the application being used to organize the data, manual coding was still necessary (Friese, 2019). Six themes emerged from the data analysis, which are described below.

Analysis and Findings

Our findings reveal that the support roles and responsibilities of CMs are often used closely related and often used interchangeably. The direct roles and responsibilities that were identified was: Provide clear direction on CMs roles and responsibilities; support; monitor and ensure compliance by principals and schools; influence and provide direction to principals; governance and compliance; modeling and sharing of best practices. The analysis and finding also suggests that CM's support to principals during education change and specifically context relevant support during education change is found wanting. Overall, CMs and principals were acutely aware that managing change within an education system where human and physical resources are lacking is very difficult and is also exacerbated by socio-economic, financial, and political factors. These factors added to the vast additional administrative workload that CMs and principals have to deal with daily, which causes anxiety and overburdening to execute their direct roles and responsibilities in a system where they are expected to provide a clear direction for principals in dealing with education change.

Clear Direction on the Circuit Manager' Roles and Responsibilities

The CMs' idea of their support roles relates to all aspects of the daily management and operation of a school, including administrative, human, and physical resource support, curriculum support, extracurricular, and school management. Our findings show that principals heavily rely on the CMs and circuit office in their district for information, administrative guidance, and expert counseling throughout education change. CM need to support the coordination of services provided by other district office units. Additionally, CM are in charge of keeping an eye on and guaranteeing policy and legislation implementation in schools. CMs agreed that they do not have clear direction on their roles and responsibilities as they are expected to do much more as what is stipulated in their job descriptions. In turn, CMs are expected to provide clear direction to schools to ensure that they are properly administered and in compliance with relevant laws and regulations which according to policy (DBE, 2013) is the primary objective of CM support. The participants highlighted a pressing concern that, in order to raise school performance and the caliber of instruction across the board they need guidance and support from, districts, PEDs, and DBE. For CMs to achieve their objectives without clear direction from districts, PEDs, and the DBE, will become more challenging as principals need ongoing support and guidance regarding various aspects in their school as

resource are aging, declining, and becoming more redundant especially during continuous education change. For example, the following participants stated:

CM support is linked to direct support. When I refer to direct support, it means when the principal reports anything to the CM, whether it's infrastructure or a labour case or whatever it is in the report. The CM is directly responsible in the support that should be given to the principal and the school. Whether it's to resolve a matter or give advice on, or how the principals should handle certain things. And also, the direct support is specifically one key focus area within whole-school evaluation (CM2, DA1).

The CM has to coordinate policy implementation, processes and plans prescribed by district and head office for schools. Ensure schools' compliance and fulfilment of obligations and regulations (CM4, DA2).

From other participants view, it was clear that there was uncertainty regarding the specifics of the CM support roles and responsibilities. This is unfortunate since it means that without clear instructions on what comprises CM roles and responsibilities, it is unlikely that they will be able to carry them out effectively. It was feasible to understand the participants' perspectives on the responsibilities and roles of the CMs when they shared their personal experiences. Thakasa (2011) also poses the topic of what precisely the roles and responsibilities of the CM are in his analysis of the circuit development program established in the Limpopo region of South Africa. It was clear from the comments below that the CM were uncertain about their roles and responsibilities.

Often your real job is at a standstill because you are following mandates or other units' demands and requests elsewhere that is not your role or responsibility (CM3, DA1)

We need clarity of what we are actually responsible for (CM1, DA2).

It seems the CM does not have clear direction of what their job entails (P9, DA1).

CM are often expected by the district, PED and DBE to take responsibility for matters that are beyond their mandate or job description. CM find themselves spending a lot of time on these expectations and responsibilities that take much of their time when they are supposed to focus on their role and responsibilities as described by the DBE policy. CM need clear direction what their role and responsibilities within the education system are (CM4, DA1).

Participants demonstrate that to assist principals and schools in effectively coping with educational change, CMs need to have their support roles and responsibilities well defined. It is clear that the district expects CMs to take on duties that go outside the purview of their management responsibilities that are actually the duty of other departments or leadership structures at the district, provincial, and national levels. Their job description or list of duties does not include these extended duties and/or responsibilities. This outcome is in line with studies undertaken by other researchers on CMs and principals in the Eastern Cape and North-West provinces (Bantwini & Moorosi, 2018a; Mafuwane & Pitsoe, 2014; Ndlovu, 2018; Thakasa, 2011). According to Mafuwane and Pitsoe (2014), if CM tasks and responsibilities are not clearly defined, they may be less able to support principals and execute effective leadership in schools. Everyone in the organization must be aware of and understand their duties throughout organizational transformation from the perspective of dynamic systems, as demonstrated by Deming) in his system of profound knowledge.

Support, Monitor, and Ensure Compliance

The CM's support function corresponds to the nine primary areas of focus for whole-school evaluation (DBE, 2013, 2015). A fundamental responsibility is to inform the district and the PED on the progress made by the schools in these focus areas. The CM's position comprises monitoring every area of school leadership, management, and administration and compliance with policies and legislation (DBE, 2013, 2015; RSA, 1996a). CMs are tasked with monitoring and reporting on the practices used by principals and school administration as part of their evaluation obligations (Langhan, Kariem, &

Velensky, 2012). The majority of participants indicated that their role was a mix of support and monitoring.

CM provide 90% support and to ensure compliance, 10% compliance, smooth running of the school and ensure that the school produce good learner results (CM3, DA1).

As CM, we support and monitor processes of principals and schools. We also coordinate submission requests from district level. We ensure compliance by principals and schools with policies. However, 80% of our role and responsibilities is support and monitoring in the nine key focus areas of whole-school development, and 20% is focused on compliance (CM4, DA2).

CM support role is, monitoring, and the minority will be focused on compliance; visit schools to monitor and see that all is in line with the nine key focus areas (P8, DA1).

The aforementioned responses attest to the extended support role of CMs to provide support, monitor, and ensure compliance by principals and schools as outlined in policies (DBE, 2013, 2015). The participant views were in line with Van der Voort and Wood (2016) that found CM support roles and responsibilities encompasses various functions and is essential during education transition initiatives. However, Deming (2018) cautioned that compliance does not entail holding individuals primarily accountable for their performance, but rather prioritizing support and allocating resources based on statistical data.

Influence and Provide Direction to Principals

Developing a vision and mission that are in accordance with the aims and objectives of the district and the PED is a key responsibility of the CM in their capacity as a principal's immediate line manager (DBE, 2013, 2018b). CMs noted that they had a direct impact on how principals led and managed schools to accomplish the DBE and district education goals, even though they agreed that CM support was about providing guidance to principals and schools, monitoring procedures, and ensuring compliance.

According to Bush and Glover (2016), leadership in education, is all about persuasion. In their ideas on organizational change their model of what leaders must do to successfully lead and support people through organizational change, Deming and Lewin both stressed the importance of relationships and interactions between leaders and followers (Hussain, Lei, Akram, Haider, Hussain, & Ali, 2018; Lewin, 1951). According to the responses that follow, the latter was endorsed by the majority of participants:

My role is to lead and provide clear direction to my circuit and principals in school leadership and management processes (CM3, DA1).

As manager, I supervise principals' and schools' functionality (CM4, DA2).

The CM has a direct influence on the way I lead and manage my school (P1, DA1).

The participants described how they understood the CM support duties that they had to successfully carry out in order to support principals during education change. Although the participants in the districts had differing opinions about their responsibilities, the following conclusions about those responsibilities could be drawn from the analysis and interpretation of the data. For example:

I mentor principals so that they can be empowered to influence and assist the system (CM1, DA2).

Through mentoring support from the CM, I receive guidance and clear direction (P3, DA1).

From the above responses and analysis, it was evident that the participants respect the CM mentoring support because of their knowledge of how people learn within an organization and their expertise leading educational transformation. It is critical that providing clear direction to principals to be promoted throughout the school system in order to support principals as they deal with educational reform (D'Ortenzio, 2012; Schön & Argyris, 1996).

Participants response show that they value the CM guidance, influence, and mentoring because they are skilled at managing educational change and have a thorough understanding of how principals learn in the system (Honig & Rainey, 2019). It is vital that providing direction needs to be implemented throughout the entire school system in order to support principals as they deal with educational reform (D’Ortenzio, 2012; Schön & Argyris, 1996).

COVID-19 forced us to change and the CM support role in managing and adapting to the challenges was significant – initiate change and manage change processes (CM4, DA1).

The CM support during the school’s transition to offering technical subjects was very important. The CM supported me during the initial process, and she facilitated and managed several processes between the schools and the district (P6, DA2).

CM have to initiate, develop, [and] implement new plans and strategies in dealing with education change (CM3, DA1).

The above responses indicate that the way principals lead and manage their schools during education change is directly impacted by the direction that CM provide to principals in dealing with education change.

Administrative Support and Coordination

The most daunting and labor-intensive task of the CM is administrative support and coordination, as it attests to majority of time spend. Principals perceive CM as a crucial administrative support system and informational resource hub, especially during periods of educational transformation. This was amply demonstrated by the participants’ responses and experiences during the COVID-19 outbreak, when they were forced to report on schools, teachers, and students to the DBE. The circuit office manages school reports, data, and analysis for the district and many departments at the district and provincial and the CM responsibility is to ensure that schools adhere by submission requests (DBE, 2013, 2016b, 2018a). CM’s administrative responsibilities mainly activates their support function to principals and schools. The CMs ensure that schools adhere to the administrative standards and expectations of the district and the DBE and that principals submit their reports on schedule. CMs’ administrative support provision include coordinating these administrative submissions to various sub-directorates or departments within the district and the PED. This was evident from the following participants:

The CM is our resource centre and point of administrative submission . . . the CM reminds me of submissions to districts . . . they ensure that submissions are coordinated to the correct units or departments (P6, DA2).

The CM support is enacted through their administrative function (P1, DA1).

CM are the administrative hub for submissions to district and provincial offices . . . the CM ensures that my submission reaches the district and provincial offices (P7, DA1).

In addition, a few of the participants viewed CM administrative support and coordination as being in control of principals’ and schools’ submissions to districts and PEDs –

Support in daily COVID-19 reports and weekly submissions; the CM is in charge to ensure that principal report (P2, DA2).

From an administrative role, I ensure that principals submit reports and I coordinate the reports to the applicable departments (CM4, DA2).

However, the primary administrative duty of the CM according to the DBE (2013) policy is to profile, re-profile, and report on the performance of principals and schools. A few participants described how they understood the administrative support provided by the CM.

The CM is responsibility is to profile a principal and school according to the nine key focus areas of whole-school development, meaning we profile the principals and school and identify the weak areas by coding those areas red (urgent support needed), amber (continuous support needed) and green as performing (maintain support). Support provision is focused on red and then amber. As soon as red becomes amber, and amber becomes green, then we re-profile the principal and school (CM2, DA1).

CM profile principals, teachers and the school according to the nine key focus areas of whole-school evaluation (P1, DA1).

From the responses and analysis, it was evident that there were differing opinions about the CM expertise with regard to their administrative duties.

The administrative responsibilities are a huge challenge and concern. From the CM side, the administration responsibilities are overwhelming, and we delegate a lot of our administrative duties to schools. We are guilty of that. When we request data or submission, it's most of the time malicious compliance (CM3, DA1).

Admin work has doubled in the last ten years; however, the CM does support when I need support (P4, DA1).

The participating principals and CMs appear to comprehend their administrative tasks quite clearly and the overwhelming expectation to fulfil these responsibilities. According to the responses given above, it is evident that they are required to support principals and schools in a variety of educational-related areas and CMs are aware that the administrative support they offer principals and schools is a crucial form of support for principals in different challenging context and particularly during times of educational change.

The DBE's strategy for enhancing the availability and quality of education in schools is outlined in the whole-school evaluation policy (DBE, 2015). However, it is also clear from the responses that principals and CMs spend a lot of time on administration and compliance task and issues. Deming warns against this, stating that while evaluation is a valuable technique to identify weak points in the system, reliance on inspection alone to achieve quality should end because quality is achieved through streamlining operations with sufficient support.

Governance and Compliance

Even if maintaining governance and compliance is just a minor part of the CMs' job description, they also have to ensure that policy mandates are adhered to by principals and schools. All education policies are developed and aligned to the National Education Policy 27 of 1996 (Republic of South Africa, 1996a). The policy directs how the CM's and the district's roles and responsibilities are delegated. As a district representative, the CM's job is ensuring that schools are led and managed in accordance with the relevant DBE policies (DBE, 2013; Republic of South Africa, 1996a, 1996b, 2005, 2007). The participants accentuated the above by stating:

The CM ensures governance and compliance in school to ensure a conducive environment is established for quality teaching and learning (P3, DA1).

CM ensure governance and make sure schools comply to policies and legislation (P4, DA1).

The CM role in this regard is, "... monitoring the school in terms of governance and compliance. Compliance in terms of what we find in the whole-school evaluation document. And that is also captured very correctly in Gauteng Circular 1 of 2020 (CM2, DA1).

From the above responses, it was evident that CMs clearly understood their support role and responsibilities in ensuring principals and schools comply with policies and legislation.

Modeling and Sharing Good Practice

Government's aim on whole-school development and evaluation is to provide education to all its citizens and to improve education provision during education change. Deming emphasizes that

organizations should adopt new methods of operation to effect organizational change (Deming, 2018; Gogue, 2005). Building trust and motivating CMs and principals to handle organizational change are strategies used in conjunction with modeling and sharing effective practices. CMs can pay special attention to people's relationships and demonstrate dedication to everyone by modeling and sharing.

Participating CMs stated that it is important to consider the environment in which principals operate and guide schools while demonstrating best practices. The necessity for sharing best practices in challenging context and education change has grown as principals struggle to manage and implement education change in schools. Participants stressed the significance of educating principals on excellent practices:

Some schools have resources, and others don't, and to implement a generic approach to manage a school is difficult; one has to consider the resources available to principals and school (CM1, DA2).

We need to meet more to share best practices (P8, DA1).

Over the years, these shared practices have dissipated. Districts do not provide these types of meetings anymore. Sharing good practices initiatives has disappeared, and it is not about COVID; it has disappeared long before that. We need that to be re-established again. We need sessions where principals of all the different quintile schools can share experience, advice, practice and challenges (P13, DA2).

An example where sharing good practice was when one principal stated that:

The CM took my curriculum implementation and approach model during COVID-19 and gave it to the district to implement in other schools throughout the province (P4, DA1).

The Department of Basic Education (2013) policy states that the CMs and principals are accountable for the provision of quality education and learner performance during education change. They must lead by example and share best practices in order to handle changes in the educational system. This supports Deming's change theory which accentuates the importance of modeling and sharing good practices during any change in organizations (Deming, , 2018). CMs must consider the various difficulties that arise in the unique situations in which principals work when they are modeling and disseminating excellent practices. Principals won't be able to properly handle changes in schooling without the required resources. Deming forewarns that if obstacles, in this case a shortage of resources, are not removed, individuals won't be motivated to make the necessary adjustments. The participants agreed that a critical role of the CM is to disseminate effective practices from schools in the nine major areas of whole-school development (DBE, 2015), since it is crucial to support schools that are underperforming in certain focal areas as the educational system changes. The participants emphasized that utilizing other schools' ideas that were similar to their own educational contexts and exchanging best practices had helped them deal with educational change.

Not all schools have the same resources, however we might have similar challenges that we have to deal with. Therefore, it is important that CM and principals share their experiences and approaches in dealing with those challenges (P8, DA1).

I have assisted principals in acquiring funding to build additional classrooms (P13, DA2).

Best practices need to be shared more than ever as principals strive to handle their specific challenges and changes in education. The participants emphasized the value of teaching principals on great practices in a variety of ways, some of which are included below:

It is difficult to establish a general management strategy for a school; one must consider the resources that principals and schools have available, according to participant 1 (CM1, DA2).

We should get together more often to exchange best practices, according to participant 2 (P8, DA1).

The responses provided above it is clear that in order to manage changes in the educational system, CM must set an excellent example and share best practices. This is consistent with Deming's theory and supports his hypotheses that modeling and sharing good practices is cornerstone to sustainable

change in organizations (Deming, 1993). However, the participants' remarks indicate that when CM are modeling and sharing outstanding practices, they must consider the numerous challenges that occur in the circumstances in which principals work. Without the necessary resources, they won't be able to effectively address changes in the educational system. The findings also showed that many schools had outdated infrastructure and lacked even the most basic tools necessary to create an environment that would be favorable to teaching and learning and enhance the quality of their educational offerings. From the analysis, it is clear that principals will benefit greatly from modeling and exchanging best practices to help them deal with difficulties and improve a school's weak areas of performance while it is being evaluated.

Discussions and Recommendations

This study makes a unique contribution to our knowledge of how CMs assist principals in the South African basic education system throughout periods of educational reform. As this study was conducted in the central hub of South Africa which represents a wide geographic area and with a variety of different quantile schools which characterizes other education districts and PEDs in South Africa. As stated by Chingara (2019), Gabster et al. (2020), Howard et al. (2019) that many African and Western world countries have similar challenges they face during education change. The finding within in this study can also be implement in other countries and provinces within South Africa as basic education is implemented by the DBE with a similar education approach as education district, area districts education departments within African developing countries like Pakistan, Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya, Sierra Leone and the or federal education departments in Mexico, Argentina, and America (Chingara, 2019; Ncwena 2019; Tanveer et al., 2020). It's critical to realize that the duties performed by CMs are influenced by the role they play and their support roles and responsibilities, the more they concentrate on their administrative and compliance tasks, the more they will only be concerned with the submissions and compliance of their schools. The participants are in the view that they were frequently required by the district and PED to assume accountability and responsibility for tasks outside of their purview or job description. The CMs emphasized that because it took up a lot of their time when they should be concentrating on their primary duty, spending time on such additional obligations had a direct impact on the support they could offer to principals and schools. It was clear from the data analysis and interpretation that CMs required precise guidance from districts and PEDs regarding their role and responsibilities.

The findings of this study can be of immense value on an international level where it is expected of school inspectors and education superintendents to give effective support especially during education change (Chingara, 2019; Ncwane, 2019). The body of knowledge produced by this study will assist the DBE, the GDE, educational districts, and especially CMs, school inspectors, and school superintendents, principal supervisors as they are called in Africa, Asia, Europe, and America can benefit from the findings and recommendations to improve their essential support to assist principals in trying circumstances and during education change. The researcher's findings can be used to guide officials in drafting their own recommendations addressing the provision of CMs, schools inspectors, or school superintendent, principal supervisors support during educational transformation because the subject of existing legislation is often vague and confusing. CM, school inspectors, principal supervisors and superintendents can make use of the study's recommendations in an effort to enhance the ethos, environment, and management of schools in their education circuits, districts provinces, or federal education departments. Improved CM support may also affect School Management Team's (SMT) and School Governing Body's (SGB) effectiveness, capability, management motivation, and participation, as well as overall school achievement through the effective delivery of essential and sustainable support. Even though the qualitative study provided an in-depth, detailed description of the phenomena of the support roles and responsibilities of the CM to principals throughout education change in the South African context, the researchers must point out that a quantitative study would have enhanced the findings. Quantitative studies may have revealed information about the phenomenon

that the qualitative approach may have overlooked. By using a quantitative approach, one might test the many factors, connections, and connections between people and the parts of an organization. The sample size was constrained by the researchers needs; thus, a bigger sample size can be used across several South African provinces and districts as well as other countries' educational systems to generalize the research findings. A comparison was made between a few African nations and first-world nations. However, the researchers suggest that research be conducted in developing nations on a global scale to inspire district officials, particularly education superintendents and inspectors who hold positions akin to those of the CM in the context of South Africa's basic education, to provide better, more efficient support to principals during educational change. The two selected districts in the Gauteng Province are a sound representation of other districts in South Africa and those of other developing countries in Africa and abroad (Chingara, 2019; Ncwane, 2019). As is typical in democracies, social, economic, cultural, and political forces are the cause of many education changes in South Africa, which also has a deliberate impact on the support roles and responsibilities of the CM to principals. It was discovered that obstacles from outside support, such as a unionized educational environment and political interference, limit the CM's ability to do their duties effectively. As CMs are seen as the indispensable link between districts and schools because they are principals' direct supervisors. CMs have been under a lot of strain as a result of the restructuring of education and the difficulties that come with change. It is therefore imperative that CMs as middle tier management within an education district shift their focus from administration, compliance, and policy implementers to dictate more of their efforts toward effective support provision to principals in their specific challenging context.

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