

An action-learning model to assist Circuit Teams to support School Management Teams towards whole-school development

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The Education District and Circuit Offices in South Africa are mandated by the Department of Basic Education to support schools under their jurisdiction. Reasons for the lack of such support to schools have been highlighted in various reports and research findings. This paper examines the role that properly constructed school improvement plans, developed by schools, and circuit improvement plans, developed by the Circuit Team, plays in effective district/circuit support to schools. We report on the construction of a theoretical model to assist Circuit Teams to support School Management Teams of underperforming high schools towards whole-school development in which these improvement plans play a central role. We followed an action research design, employing qualitative data generation and analysis methods. The participating School Management Teams and Circuit Team members attested to the value of the collaborative learning experience which ignited feelings of empowerment and increased cooperation. These findings suggest the value of an action learning approach to the professional development of both School Management Teams and Circuit Team members. The action-learning model that emerged from this collaborative enquiry consists of three distinctive phases, each phase containing a number of specific activities to be implemented in order for schools to progress towards becoming self-managing institutions of learning.

Keywords: action learning; action research; circuit improvement plan; Circuit Team(s); District Office; model; school improvement plan; School Management Team(s); whole-school development

Introduction

If the role of the Education District and Circuit Officers in South Africa is to work collaboratively with schools to improve educational access and retention, provide management and professional support and help schools achieve excellence in teaching and learning (Department of Basic Education, Republic of South Africa, 2013), why are so many schools in the country underperforming? This question is posed against the background of growing reports that indicate the state of education in South Africa is in crisis. Spaull (2013) investigated the quality of education in the country between 1994 and 2011, and came to the conclusion that, except for a wealthy minority, most South African pupils cannot read, write and calculate at grade-appropriate levels. He also found that South Africa had the worst education system of all middle-income countries and that it even performed worse than many low-income African countries in cross-national assessments of educational achievement.

These low levels of learner achievement can be linked to the general state of dysfunctionality that many schools find themselves in as a result of poor management and leadership (Van der Voort, 2013). Taylor, in his analysis of Grade 12 examination results, also concluded that, “*some 80 percent of schools are highly ineffective...*” (2009:11), a finding corroborated by Smit and Oosthuizen (2011), who reported, 15 years into democracy, that there had been an alarming increase in the percentage of dysfunctional schools.

Schools do not exist in isolation, but are part of the education system, which consists of the Department of Basic Education (at national level), nine provincial education departments, district and circuit offices. The function of these offices is to assist and support schools in delivering their core function, namely to improve the educational achievements of all learners (Department of Education, 2001). Visits to schools and interaction with school managers on school development issues by district/circuit officials are not happening in many areas across the country. A survey conducted by the public service commission in Limpopo, Northern Cape and Kwa-Zulu Natal provinces found inter alia that schools were hardly ever visited by circuit managers. Principals complained that they could not sit down and discuss problems at their schools with circuit managers, as their visits were merely routines and they seldom had time to interact with principals. In some cases, the circuit managers were so incompetent that principals had to guide and inform them on management issues (The Public Service Commission, 2006). Similar findings are reported in the Eastern Cape Province, where support to schools is seriously lacking. In this province, circuit managers do not have any formal assessment tool, checklist or intervention plan in place that informs their visits to schools. District officials are often unavailable to assist schools and too many officials are perceived as being incompetent (Province of the Eastern Cape, Department of Education, 2008, 2009).

The situations described above provide a mere snap-shot of the problem that the education system in South Africa has experienced for years. Dysfunctional schools will remain in this state if they do not receive the required support by the very people who have been employed by the system to do just that. Bantwini and Diko (2011) indicate that support to schools, particularly rural and historically disadvantaged schools, is often fragmented and uncoordinated, and that district (circuit) support to schools within the South African context requires much more

research and attention. Against this background we sought to answer the following research question: *‘how can circuit teams effectively support school management teams of underperforming schools towards whole-school development?’* The aim of our research was to develop a theoretical model to assist Circuit Teams to support School Management Teams. This paper builds on work previously published in this regard (Van der Voort & Wood, 2014).

The lack of effective district support to schools is not only limited to South Africa. At an international level Bantwini and Diko (2011) present evidence that district offices in numerous countries are unresponsive to the needs of the public and schools, and that there is a clear correlation between the lack of support and district officials’ understanding of educational reforms that they have to manage. Duke, Carr and Sterrett (2013) caution that learners’ futures are at stake if the dysfunctional schools they attend do not become more functional, and lead to enhanced learner achievement levels. Pritchett, Banerji and Kenny (2013) found that the majority of learners in developing countries leave school unable to read a paragraph or do simple addition, a problem caused by education authorities not focusing on sound educational outcomes and being held accountable to the public at large. Anderson and Mundy (2014) highlight the importance of accountability, stating that it influences school improvement efforts around the world, especially with regard to basic literacy and numeracy.

We first provide an overview of the thinking that guided our intervention and data analysis, before explaining our research design. Thereafter we explain how we used the findings to construct the model and explain how we envisage it being implemented. We offer the model as a basis for how schools and district officials can collaborate towards school improvement, while adapting it to their individual contexts.

The Role of the District Office in Whole-School Development

Whole-school development is a holistic process that aims to improve all aspects of the school (such as its academic achievements, infrastructure, social environment and security), and involves all members of the school community (i.e. School Management Team, School Governing Body, educators, support staff, learners, parents, community members, alumni, Departments of Education and Social Development as well as donors) (Naidu, Joubert, Mestry, Mosoge & Ngcobo, 2008; Westraad, 2011) to contribute collectively to quality education (Moolla, 2006).

Whole-school development has to be managed in the first place at institutional level in order for it to succeed. The School Management Team has to

implement whole-school development, and the quality of leadership and management in the school plays a vital role in determining successful implementation (Ngubane, 2005). Principals actively build the tone and ethos of the school and establish high expectations for teachers and learners by developing a leadership team that promotes a shared commitment to quality teaching and improved student achievement (Queensland Government, Department of Education and Training, 2010).

School-based decision-making contributes to the establishment of self-managing schools, which Ngubane (2005) defines as institutions where significant and consistent decentralisation of authority to make decisions related to the operations of the school take place. This calls for Principals to consult all relevant stakeholders for inputs that will lead to whole-school development, since *“school success is a dynamic process that requires on-going efforts by all involved”* (Pollock & Winton, 2012:16). Whilst it is important for principals to adopt the roles of strategic thinker and culture-builder in order to promote sustainable change and enhanced academic achievement levels, they first have to build relationships of trust with others (Owens, 2010). In this regard leadership must employ honest communication, competence and openness. Shared values and vision, collective responsibility, reflective professional inquiry, and collaboration are thus necessary to building and sustaining whole-school development.

In the second place, whole-school development has to be supported by the district office. Bantwini and King-McKenzie (2011) point out that the role of the district office in supporting schools is indisputable, and that officials at this level of the system are also pivotal in capacity-building at school level. Bantwini and Diko (2011) argue that schools cannot redesign themselves and that districts play an important function in establishing the conditions for long-term improvements at schools.

Numerous factors have been identified as hampering successful school support at district level. Taylor and Prinsloo (2005) found that district officials were unsure about their roles and did not possess the authority required to fulfil their functions. A lack of resources handicapped the intentions of these officials as well. Bantwini and Diko highlight the *“deficit of human capacity, hindering and incapacitating the few officials from effectively servicing schools...”* (2011:233), indicating that district officials often lack in-depth understanding of the mandates they have to deliver to schools.

The specific focus of this paper, in dealing with the need for district/circuit officials to effectively support whole-school development at institutional level, lies in the absence of a school improvement plan developed by the schools on the one hand, and

a circuit improvement plan, developed by the circuit team, on the other. MacMaster (2010, pers. comm.) emphasises that unless each school develops its school improvement plan based on its specific needs and hands it to the district office for intervention, the district office cannot assist schools to make qualitative improvements. Sister adds that, *“in order for schools to succeed in the implementation process, planning by the District needs to be influenced by the needs at school level”* (2004:68).

Westraad is one of very few authors who links the improvement plans at the various levels of the education system: *“Once this plan [school improvement plan] is submitted to the school’s circuit manager, it is integrated into a circuit improvement plan ...”* (2011:4–5). Her exposition is useful for the research we undertook as it clearly explains the interaction between the school and circuit improvement plans within the context of whole-school development. However, she does not provide explicit guidelines on how to structure the improvement plans, what information they need to contain, and how implementation should happen. It is in this regard that our research addresses these shortcomings.

Methodology

The research question guiding this study was formulated as follows: ‘how can circuit teams effectively support school management teams of underperforming schools towards whole-school development?’ and implies that members of both the circuit team as well as the school management team play an active part in the roll-out of the research. This further implies that the participants would be empowered to become agents of change, hence we adopted a critical theoretical paradigm as the epistemological foundation of the study. The purpose of critical theory is not only to understand situations, but to change people by allowing them to take ownership of the process (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007).

We selected a qualitative research approach to the study as it supports naturalistic inquiry, allowing the researcher to become involved in the research, and thereby enabling them to understand the phenomenon under investigation in all its complexities (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Action research was the specific methodology applicable to the research study as it promotes collaboration, improves practice through critical reflection and life-long-learning, and strengthens accountability (Cohen et al., 2007). To design a model that would enable circuit teams to support school management teams of underperforming high schools towards whole-school development, we conducted two action research cycles, depicted in Figure 1, where we worked with the participants to identify their concerns, design an action plan, implement it, and reflect on it (Van der Voort, 2013). The first cycle

dealt with assisting the schools and the circuit team in constructing their school improvement plans and circuit improvement plan respectively, and was reported on in a previous publication (Van der Voort & Wood, 2014), and is merely summarised here. The second cycle focused on the support systems required for the implementation of these improvement plans. The model was based on our reflection on the findings of these two cycles.

The circuit team manager assisted us in the purposeful selection (Neuman, 2006) of four underperforming high schools in his circuit in a large township in the Cape Town metropolitan area. According to Swart (2011, pers. comm), the Western Cape Education Department deemed every high school in the Province that achieved a pass rate below 60% in the National Senior Certificate Examinations, as underperforming. Table 2 indicates that all four schools were below the 60% average with regards to their 2010 results. In addition, the Circuit Team Manager informed us about various management problems, such as lack of leadership, uncertainty of roles and responsibilities, and in-house fighting experienced by these schools. However, despite these problems, the school management teams of all four schools were eager to become involved in the study as they anticipated the benefits it could bring to their institutions.

Data was generated through participant observation (Gibson & Brown, 2009), focus group and individual interviews (Gillham, 2000) and document analysis (Gibson & Brown, 2009). The eight steps identified by Tesch (1990), as stated in Creswell (2003), were used to thematically analyse the data. Trustworthiness of data was ensured by triangulation of data sources, peer briefing, member checks, avoidance of inferences and generalisations, avoiding the selective use of data, as well as independent recoding (Flick, 2006). We presented the model to the participants who deemed it to be a valid representation of the process they had to follow to improve the functionality of the schools. Ethical considerations that apply to qualitative research (Neuman, 2006) were employed in the research study, which was granted ethical clearance by the University in question.

Overview of Findings that Informed the Model Design

The findings presented in this section are taken from Van der Voort (2013), as well as Van der Voort and Wood (2014). Two main problems were identified during Cycle One. The first was that the Circuit Team did not function as a team due to the autocratic management style of the Circuit Team Manager. They were dissatisfied that he never consulted them on decisions he made. The Circuit Team Manager realised that he had to solve the problem and held a workshop with the team in which the vision and

mission, as well as roles and responsibilities, were clarified. He also introduced other measures to unite the team, such as early morning briefings with them

on the developments at particular schools, as well as guiding them on their support to specific schools.

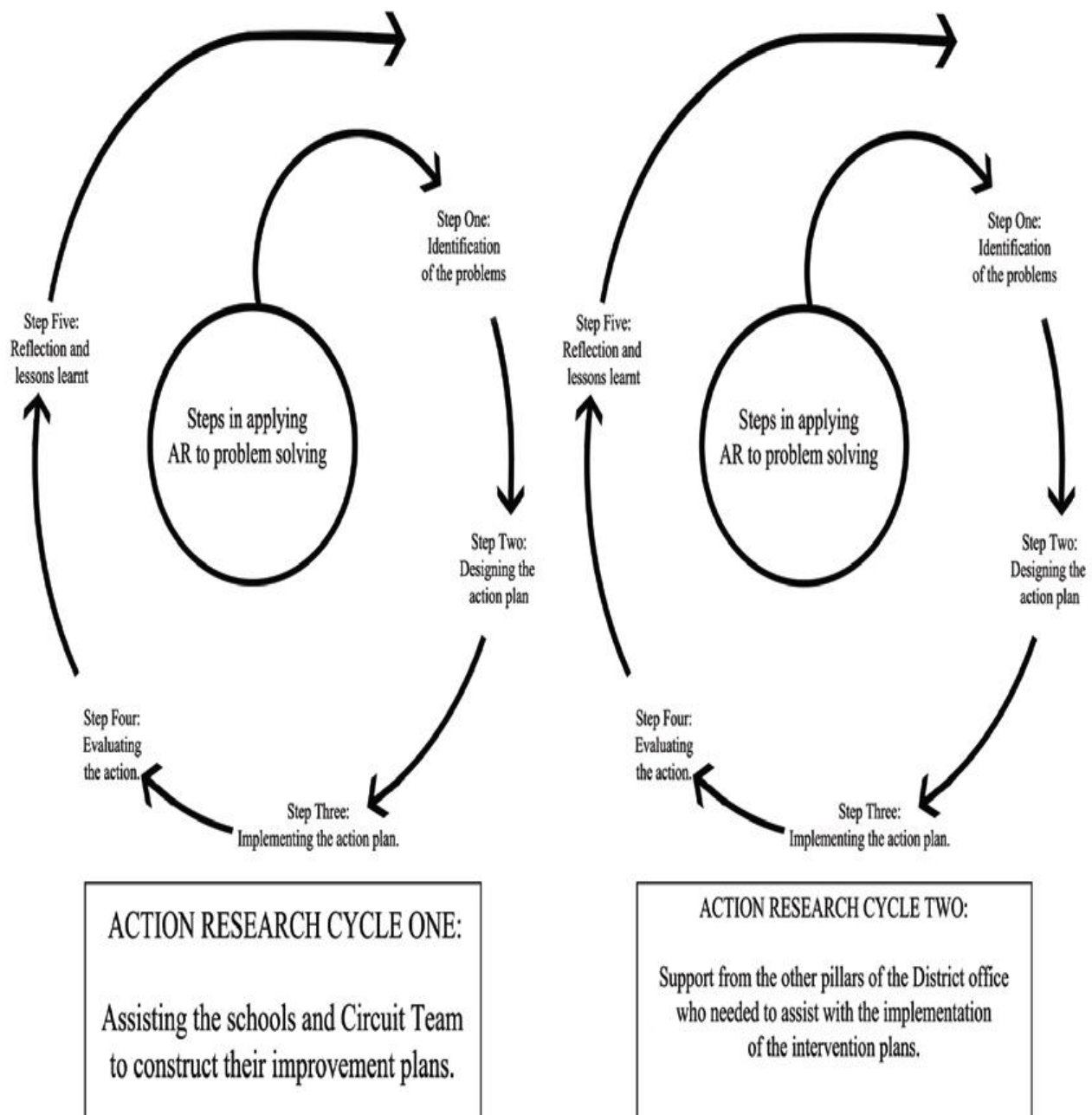


Figure 1 The two action research cycles developed during the fieldwork (Van der Voort, 2013:136)

The second problem was that none of the four schools had a written school improvement plan in place, and the Circuit Team could not produce evidence of a circuit improvement plan. During our interviews with the school management teams (hereafter SMTs), we found that they were able to articulate the areas in which they required support from the Circuit Team. However, the SMTs could only focus on issues related to academic improve-

ment and lacked a holistic view of the school as an open system.

In consultation with the Circuit Team members and the SMTs, it was agreed to host a workshop to assist the SMTs to construct their school improvement plans, and that a follow-up session would be held to enable the Circuit Team to develop their circuit improvement plan for supporting the four schools.

During the workshop we assisted the schools to undertake school self-evaluation, using the instruments provided by the Department of Basic Education for whole-school evaluation (Department of Education, 2000). We then guided them to identify their top priorities for the remainder of the academic year, and provided them with a template to write up their school improvement plan in which the priorities had to be listed, the action steps to be followed spelt out, time frames for the completion of each action step identified, and key person(s) responsible for executing each activity mentioned.

In a follow-up session with the Circuit Team members, we assisted them to develop their circuit improvement plan, based on the needs expressed in the school improvement plans. It was agreed beforehand that the school improvement plans would entail activities that the SMTs would undertake, whilst the circuit improvement plan would focus on activities that the Circuit Team itself would deliver. The Circuit Team members were taken through the same procedure as the SMTs, and used the same agreed-upon template to write up the circuit improvement plan.

A follow-up session with all participants was thereafter arranged. At the beginning of this session, the Circuit Team gave feedback on how the circuit improvement plan was developed, and how it would complement the activities in the school improvement plans. At that stage, the schools insisted that other pillars of the District Office, in particular the curriculum advisors, ought to be brought on board during the second cycle. The workshop concluded with feedback from the participants about their experiences in the previous workshop. From the feedback, the following themes emerged:

The participants agreed that the workshop was an empowering and capacity-building experience. They also benefitted from interacting with their colleagues from the other schools. They learnt the importance of reflection and how to apply it to their daily management practices. Gratitude was expressed for the gradual manner in which the content was facilitated, providing them the opportunity to master each step in the sequence of activities.

With the above the overall outcome of this action research cycle was achieved: the individual schools constructed their school improvement plans whilst the Circuit Team developed their circuit improvement plan in a collaborative, reflective manner. The lesson we learnt from cycle one echoes Revans' (2011) findings about action-learning, that is, when participants experience a capacity-building session as purposeful to their lives, they become actively engrossed in the learning process. The participants only needed the space and time to be supported to write up their improvement plans. When people take ownership of an intervention, they will be actively involved in the implementation of

the required strategies listed in the improvement plans (McGill & Beaty, 1995). We also learnt that it is important that all role-players, both from the school communities as well as the Circuit Team, be taken on board of the process.

The necessity for the second action research cycle was already identified by the SMT members in the previous cycle, i.e. to bring support from other pillars of the District Office on board to assist with the implementation of the intervention plans. There was a strong demand for assistance from the curriculum advisors in particular to assist the schools with achieving enhanced learner achievement rates. However, there were power struggles between the Circuit Team Manager and Chief Curriculum Advisor. These internal politics resulted in the Chief Curriculum Advisor not allowing the curriculum advisors to participate in the research. The only viable route to address this unforeseen barrier was to call the SMTs to a meeting to discuss alternative ways in which to deal with the support they required.

At the meeting, the participants sat in groups, discussing the needs that had to be addressed. From the discussions, three themes emerged:

- SMTs needed capacity-building to manage their schools effectively: instructional leadership, school management and leadership in general, as well as the implementation of academic improvement plans, were some of the major challenges faced by the participants.
- The second theme was that teachers needed support to implement the curriculum: This entailed support in terms of subject knowledge and teaching methodologies. Dealing with learner behaviour and discipline, proper time management, enhanced morale and on-site support from curriculum advisors were issues that were high on their agenda.
- The third theme centred on assistance that learners required to achieve better results: Issues listed under this theme included extra classes, motivational sessions and counselling for those learners who faced traumatic events in their lives.

At the end of the session, it was agreed that the Circuit Team Manager would take the issues raised by the schools back to the District Office and to elicit support from the District to assist the schools with the barriers they faced.

Our evaluation of the action undertaken revealed the following themes:

Firstly, the value of mutual support: It was especially the Heads of Department that acknowledged the importance of learning from each other and being able to support one another:

Networking is an important tool in empowering ourselves. It enables growth and free sharing, knowing and realising through these discussions that I am not alone. There are other HODs and the Curriculum Advisor to communicate with and to ask for help where needed (Head of Department).

Secondly, the value of constructing a plan of action and following through with it was emphasised by the

principals, referring specifically to their school improvement plans:

We are becoming aware that a plan is as good as its implementation [...] We have identified gaps with regard to implementation, and these need to be addressed as a matter of urgency (Principal).

Thirdly, greater teamwork and positive working relations within the ranks of the Circuit Team in supporting and assisting the four schools were reported by the circuit managers. It is interesting to note from their feedback that the improved situation at Circuit Team level also had a positive effect on the SMTs, and that numerous problems at school level have been addressed:

There is enhanced teamwork at management level. Management meetings are planned. We have been able to curb educator late-coming and absenteeism, and we partially improved learner late-coming as well [...] There is cohesion and improved working relations amongst the members at management level (Circuit Manager).

The intended outcome of this action research cycle was achieved, in the sense that the participants were able to articulate the areas of support needed from the other pillars of the District Office. However, for interventions to be successfully implemented, it is imperative that the other pillars of the District Office be brought on board, right from the beginning of any intervention. From our interactions with the participants, we learnt the importance of a bottom-up approach for identifying needs for support and intervention. A breakthrough was the fact that the Circuit Team members, who were initially fragmented, now experienced greater teamwork and cooperation.

Explanation of the Model to Assist Circuit Teams in Supporting School Management Teams towards Whole-School Development

Based on the outcomes of the literature review, as well as the findings of the fieldwork, a spiral model depicted in Figure 2 was constructed, consisting of three distinctive phases: a Preparatory Phase, an Implementation Phase and a Maintenance and Dissemination Phase. Each of these respective phases consists of a number of loops in which specific actions to be taken by the SMTs and the Circuit Team are described. In the following discussion, a structural description of the model is presented.

The model is in essence an action-learning model (indicated by the iterative loops) that allows SMTs and the Circuit Team to constantly reflect on their practices to identify where improvement is needed (see arrow cutting through all three phases). The reflective practice is underpinned by the five disciplines of a learning organisation needed to create an effective school: personal mastery, mental models, building shared vision, team building and systems thinking (Senge, 1990). Smith (2003) links

these five disciplines to a milieu where constant reflection and practice are encouraged and practised, which are central to an action-learning approach.

Apart from identifying sequential steps to be taken by the participants, the model also allows participants to return to a previous step if the action taken in a specific loop has not been completed. The thick and thin lines passing through the various loops of each phase represent the intensity of support provided to schools by the Circuit Team at each stage, with most support being given during the development, implementation and evaluation of the school improvement plans.

The preparatory phase of the model

As indicated by the findings of the first cycle, it is crucial that the Circuit Team members build working relations based on trust, so that they can form trusting relationships with the schools and enable the SMTs to form their own teams to learn how to conduct school self-evaluation. This involves the clarification of visions, missions, roles and responsibilities, improvement of communication through daily briefing sessions and the agreement on accountability measures for planning and reporting.

The same process should happen at school level. Where schools do not have vision and mission statements, the Circuit Team members have to assist them to develop these with the cooperation of all stakeholders involved. Similarly, each member of the SMT has to have a clear job description, for which such a person would be held accountable. Then a steering committee needs to be put in place to oversee the process of school self-evaluation, and representatives from all stakeholder groups need to be brought on board of the process.

The implementation phase of the model

The main emphasis of the Implementation Phase of the model is on the development, implementation and monitoring of the school improvement plans and circuit improvement plan, as these are the management and accountability tools for school improvement and whole-school development.

The schools need to conduct their school self-evaluation, using the nine areas of whole-school evaluation (Department of Education, 2000). The Circuit Team has to be on board the process to guide schools and to ensure that the outcomes of the exercise are authentic for each school within its context.

Following the outcomes of the school self-evaluation, schools are now in a position to construct their individual school improvement plans. The Circuit Team can assist the SMTs to develop templates to identify priorities and action plans, deadlines, and the allocation of responsibilities for action.

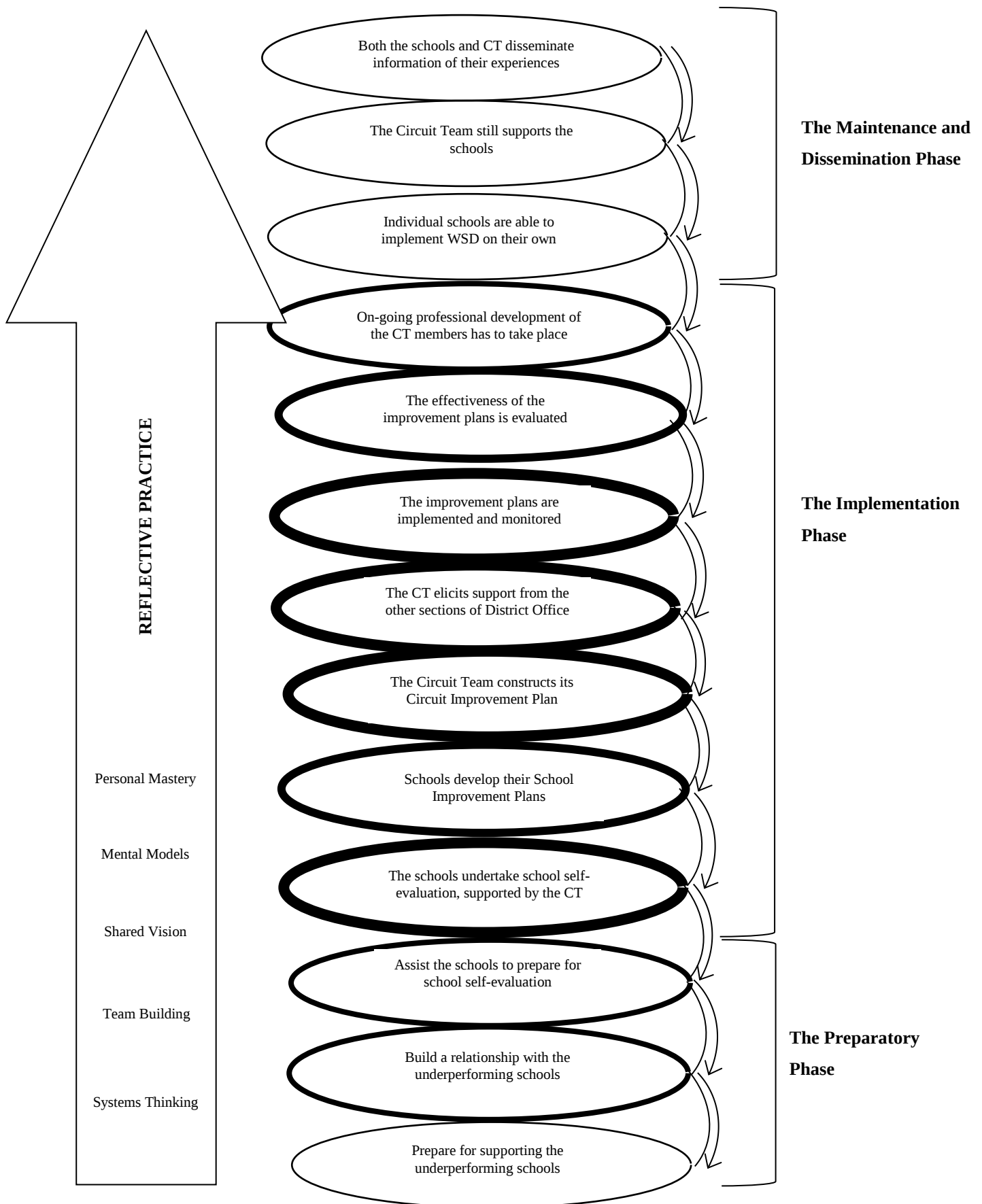


Figure 2 A model to assist Circuit Teams in supporting School Management Teams towards whole-school development (Van der Voort, 2013:203)

As soon as schools have constructed their school improvement plans, it is necessary and important that the Circuit Team develops the circuit improvement plan. This document has to be based on specific actions that the Circuit Team would undertake to complement the activities that the schools will perform (as set out in the school improvement plans). Issues common to a particular group of schools have to be identified and clustered together to allow effective service delivery. Where specific activities fall outside the working scope of the Circuit Team members, the assistance of other pillars of the District Office has to be brought on board – such assistance also needs to be integrated in the circuit improvement plan.

Implementation of the improvement plans has to be monitored on an on-going basis so as to ensure that support and development take place. Deviations that occur need to be reported and adaptations made to ensure that the plans stay on track. During our fieldwork, we found that this was the most crucial stage of the entire process that unfolded up to this moment. The smoothness with which both school and circuit improvement plans are implemented will be a clear indication whether or not the planning was of the required standard. Westraad (2011) concurs that schools struggle at the level of implementation, especially if there is not a certain level of functionality within the school.

Our interactions with the various teams led us to believe that the Principal remains the Accounting Officer for the implementation of the school improvement plan, and that the Circuit Team Manager has the same status with regard to the circuit improvement plan. Each activity listed in the plans has to be performed by the specific person(s) allocated to the task within the stipulated timeframe. Communication between all stakeholders throughout the implementation phase is critical. Regular on-site visits by members of the Circuit Team are crucial to ensuring the implementation of the activities. Regular meetings to report on progress are also non-negotiable.

At the end of an academic year, a thorough analysis of the effectiveness of the improvement plans has to be undertaken to determine what worked, and why, as well as what did not go well, and why not. Lessons for future implementation of improvement plans have to be drawn from this exercise. During our fieldwork, we discovered that this aspect was almost omitted due to the stronger emphasis placed on the implementation of the plans. We called a workshop for such an evaluation to take place. Again, various principles of action-learning, such as the importance of collaboration, reflection and communication surfaced strongly.

As Circuit Team members are leading the process of whole-school development, they have to be capacitated on an on-going basis. Regular reflection meetings, as well as formal workshops, have

to take place to broaden their scope of knowledge and skills, which they in turn can impart to the SMTs. Our interactions with members of the Circuit Teams informed us that neither the District Office nor the Western Cape Education Department had any formal training programmes in place for them. They often had to rely on their own insight or research to deal with the situations they had to face. As we view the implementation and monitoring of school and circuit improvement plans as, at their core, being a project to be managed, we strongly recommend that these officials at least be trained in project management.

The maintenance and dissemination phase of the model

The overall aim of this phase is to establish self-managing schools. The implementation of the knowledge, skills and experiences gained during the previous phase led to the breaking of the cycle of underperformance and enabling schools to become fully functional institutions of learning.

In this stage of the model, SMTs need to constantly apply what they have learned so that they can graduate to becoming self-managing institutions. The frequency of support from the Circuit Team wanes as the SMTs become more able to manage their institutions on their own. Yet, there needs to be continued communication between the two so that the Circuit Team can support as new needs arise. Because a culture of feedback and disclosure is encouraged within a learning organisation (Moloi, 2005), it is important that platforms (such as meetings or workshops) are created for both schools and Circuit Teams to share what they learnt from their interactions with one another about whole-school development. It is in this regard that dissemination becomes a central point of focus during this phase. In this way a learning culture is established and life-long learning becomes firmly embedded in the everyday practices of school managers and Departmental officials. Zuber-Skerritt (2009) confirms that within a learning organisation people are continually discovering how they can create and change their reality. This requires an attitude that learning should be life-long and cooperative.

Conclusion

The construction of the model discussed in this article answered the research question we set out to address: “how can circuit teams support school management teams of underperforming high schools towards whole-school development?” The model presented is a generic one that can be adapted to suit any local environment.

The development, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of both school and circuit improvement plans are central to the provision of support to school. The ‘Five Cs’ of action learning

can be regarded as operational principles to guide the implementation of the model. We developed these, derived from the work of McGill and Brockbank (2004), Moloi (2005) and Zuber-Skerritt (2009). It is vitally important that they undergird the interaction of all role-players at both school and circuit levels. The 'Five Cs' and their implications for the model are explained in Table 1.

The findings of the fieldwork provide evidence that the action-learning approach we modelled in this study indeed promotes learning, capacity, building, improved performance and continuous reflection by people working on real-life issues with the intention of getting things done (McGill & Brockbank, 2004; Revans, 2011).

Earlier in the article, we referred to the link between the functionality of a school and learner achievement. The National Senior Certificate re-

sults of the four schools are depicted in Table 2 below, showing the results in 2010 when the particular Circuit Team did not yet service the four schools, compared to the results at the end of 2011, which was the first year that the Circuit Team worked with the four schools. The data provides support to our claim that the implementation of the model contributed significantly to assist underperforming schools to become self-managing institutions of learning.

We believe that the process of action-learning will enable improvement to be sustained. The outcomes of this study emphasise the value of interventions based on the principles of action-learning, for the development of leadership at school and circuit levels. Such learning can, in turn, lead to enhanced functionality, thereby breaking the cycle of underperforming schools in similar contexts.

Table 1 The 'Five Cs' of action learning (Van der Voort, 2013)

Principle	Explanation	Implication for the model
Collaboration	Working jointly with others to achieve a particular goal.	School Management and Circuit Team members have to work together to share knowledge, skills and experience in order to grow.
Critical reflection (reflection-with- others)	Sharing experiences learnt in dialogue with each other so that critical reflective thinking becomes enhanced.	Such reflection has to take place at the end of each loop and phase of the model, and to prepare for the following loop or phase.
Communicative action	Rational and reflective sharing of information between all participants involved.	Communication between all participants has to take place on a daily basis so that insights, knowledge, experiences and skills are shared.
Co-accountability	The development of a common purpose and mutually agreed-upon and understood responsibilities of all participants.	Each team member has to work in a responsible and accountable manner with each other to achieve a common goal.
Commitment	A distinct attitudinal component that plays a role in an individual's internalisation of organisational values.	All participants have to whole-heartedly commit themselves to the execution of the tasks that he/she is responsible for.

Table 2 A comparison between the National Senior Certificate results at the end of the 2010 and 2011 academic years respectively (Van der Voort, 2013)

School	2010 pass %	2011 pass %	Difference
School A	38.1%	68.1%	30%
School B	45.2%	56.4%	11.2%
School C	42.6%	60.3%	17.7%
School D	52.1%	65.1%	13%

Note

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