

Improving the probability of policy acceptance and implementation: Lessons from the Gauteng Department of Education

Executive summary

The Gauteng Department of Education (GDE) identified human, systemic and structural challenges that constrained its ability to excel in delivering on its mandate (Department of Basic Education 2013; Chinsamy 2002; Roberts 2001). One of the strategies for addressing these challenges was the introduction of a new district realignment policy (Matthew Goniwe 2014), with its concomitant paradigm shift from a predominantly monitoring mode to a predominantly supportive one. In line with this policy, the GDE resolved to devote 80% of its work towards support of schools and 20% towards monitoring of compliance requirements.

The implementation of this policy suffered some setbacks (HSRC 2015). These include: emanation of unfavourable perceptions, as the district officials felt they had been reduced from specialists to generalists; high staff turnover; weak support; poor communication and planning; and lack

of will to support quality learning and teaching.

Introduction and background

A lesson drawn from the 1990s and early 2000s with respect to school improvement is that the provincial education departments were too far removed from local schools, hence the decision to realign districts for the purposes of decentralisation and effective policy implementation (Chinsamy 2002; Roberts 2001; see also the National Education Policy Act [No. 27 of 1966]). In implementing the new district realignment policy, the GDE seems to have experienced change-management challenges. The new changes did not sit well with some officials, as there was confusion about roles, responsibilities, accountability, and outcomes of the officials' intervention in schools. The Matthew Goniwe School of Leadership and Governance (MGSLG) serves as the GDE's capacity-building arm 'for School Governing Bodies, teachers, learner-leaders, parents with children in Gauteng public schools,

and school leaders and managers in the form of principals and SMTs [school management teams]' (MGSLG 2014: 1). In 2014, the MGSLG requested proposals for 'conducting a needs analysis study and developing a capacity-building plan for GDE district officials' (MGSLG 2014: 1). This policy brief draws policy implementation lessons from the broader needs analysis study.

The GDE had identified human, systemic and structural challenges that constrained its ability to excel in delivering on its mandate. The human challenges included lack of accountability and a compliance-driven approach by many officials. The systemic challenges included inappropriate resource allocation, which apportioned 67% of resources for administration, 23% for building schools, and only 10% for improving learner knowledge, skills and values (MGSLG 2014). Some of the structural challenges were inappropriate business operations, such as the separation of the departments of human resource management and corporate services, which compromised work flow and service delivery to schools.

The predominantly qualitative nature of the study depicted the perceptions and

observations of the respondents (GDE officials). The respondents' observations are not necessarily reflections of the extent of dominance of the reported practices; instead they confirm the existence of the practices. Multiplicity of views regarding the same phenomenon is thus expected. The diversity of the officials in terms of their areas of responsibility was helpful for depicting a broader picture of the status quo. Table 1 depicts the diverse sample for this study.

The key findings of the needs analysis are that many officials require capacity building in a wide range of areas, including:

- leadership and management;
- financial management;
- data collection, processing and analysis;
- communication;
- project management;
- mentoring and coaching;
- conflict management;
- problem solving; and
- report writing.

The proposed capacity-building plan for GDE district officials sought to ensure that needs in all these areas are addressed within three years (MGSLG,

2014). The next sections of this brief unpack the policy implementation lessons drawn from the above mentioned study.

The GDE's realigned structure

The suite of GDE interventions for addressing the identified challenges included approval and implementation of a new district model, generally referred to as the 'realigned structure.' The realigned structure sought to streamline human resources for the purposes of efficient service delivery and effective problem solving in schools. It also introduced a paradigm shift. Initially, the responsibilities of the GDE officials were predominantly monitoring, as characterised by the use of checklists to ascertain compliance when visiting schools. The new modus operandi sought to move schools from where they are to where they ought to be. Hence the GDE's new goal was to dedicate 80% of its efforts towards support of schools and 20% towards compliance requirements. Since support requires mutual understanding, efforts to build cordial relations between schools and districts were implemented to establish an atmosphere conducive to solving existing problems.

In brief, the realigned structure aims to:

- streamline human resources within districts to ensure that there is collaboration and better coordination in how districts support schools;
- transform the way education business and services are delivered to schools;
- ensure that districts offer more support to schools and do less monitoring;
- encourage front-line problem solving from officials as they support schools;
- improve the responsiveness of districts to the needs of the schools; and
- achieve quality education and improved learner achievement.

Table 1: Sample for the study

Officials by rank	Interviewed participants	Participants who responded to survey questionnaire	Participants who took part in focus group discussions
Chief directors	3	n/a	n/a
District directors	15	n/a	n/a
Circuit managers	15	30	15
Institutional development and support officers/Cluster leaders	30	30	14
Chief education specialists: Curriculum learning and implementation	10	13	n/a
Chief education specialists: Education operations and support	12	17	n/a
Phase coordinators/Unit coordinators	46	31	n/a
Curriculum facilitators/Subject advisors	52	68	n/a
School principals	n/a	250	n/a
Total	183	439	29

Although there was some groundwork done before the approval of the realigned structure, the difficulties with implementation indicate that inadequate preparation was made, as the level of awareness and buy-in of the realignment's objectives was low. Communication about and advocacy of the new structure, along with provision of resources for its implementation, were relatively weak.

Effective implementation of the realigned structure requires the officials to be all-rounders who are capacitated in many different fields. When district officials visit schools, they are presented with a wide range of problems, and for an official to claim, for instance, that he or she is only a curriculum facilitator and thus cannot deal with school management issues is viewed as a disservice. The whole school evaluation (WSE) has nine evaluation areas in which the team of officials must have expertise. Therefore, the realigned structure uses a teamwork approach, and officials employ the 'each one teach one' principle to sharpen one another's skills. The downside of this approach is the officials' perception that they have been reduced from specialists to generalists – hence they oppose what seems to be changing them into being 'Jacks-of-all-trades'. It is therefore important for the GDE to manage the generalists-vs-specialists perception by underscoring the personal and professional value of having diverse skills.

Human resources

The new structure translated to redundancy of some old positions and the creation of new vacancies, hence many of the existing staff members assumed new positions. The new appointments were made from the pool of officials in the system as the GDE had made an undertaking that the new structure would not translate to job losses or salary reductions. People were thus shifted around in the system and

accorded new titles. In many cases, the officials were not comfortable in their new positions because they were not qualified or experienced in their new roles. This discomfort was exacerbated by the fact that the inadequate preparation meant that some of the officials had no job descriptions; they had to provide these themselves on the basis of what they thought they should be doing in their new roles. In a context where some of the officials were unqualified or inexperienced in their new roles, the self-provided job descriptions were problematic: the officials would naturally not set themselves up for failure by designing job descriptions that were beyond their capacity to deliver.

The other policy challenge in the GDE relates to staffing. In light of limited resources, the rationale for the pupil–teacher ratio staffing model is understandable. According to this model, staffing is primarily determined by the number of learners; other considerations such as learning areas are secondary. Consequently, some schools operate without subject-relevant teachers. If the pupil–teacher ratio staffing requirements are met, subject-relevant teachers will not be recruited. Therefore the available teachers have to improvise by teaching subjects they are not qualified to teach.

The staff turnover dynamics also make it difficult for subject advisors to make progress as they claim that there is a new teacher every term. The new teachers have to be trained in GDE policies, administration, and curriculum delivery (content and teaching methods). But soon after the new teachers have been trained, some of them leave the school or are assigned to teach something else. This instability leads, for instance, to training a Sesotho teacher to teach mathematics due to the shortage of subject-relevant teachers, and helps explain why there are so many teachers who are unclear

about the content of the subject they teach.

In view of the high staff turnover, the system needs to build in shock absorbers and coping mechanisms. One example of such is a well-implemented and systematic mentoring programme for new teachers, allowing them to benefit from the experience of older teachers who are exiting the system. This approach would not be starting from scratch as the GDE already has some mechanisms in place, such as the empowerment of teachers through professional learning groups (PLGs) to develop their understanding of subject content. This is a commendable initiative that needs some improvement in order to work more effectively.

The staffing dynamics (for example, high turnover, staff shortage and large class sizes) translate to a dilemma about whether to teach for the purpose of merely covering the syllabus or for the purpose of helping learners achieve genuine understanding. Some participants argued that this challenge is aggravated by the rigid system and its structure, which compromises the effectiveness and efficiency of the schools' teacher recruitment processes. To counter this challenge, and in light of the teacher shortages, some participants suggested that teachers should work across schools and not be limited only to the school where they are based. In this way, they will be able to give relief where there is an urgent need for a subject-specific teacher. Such sharing of resources is a practical solution under the current circumstances.

The district officials, on the other hand, expressed similar frustrations regarding the quality of their support to schools. At times, the modus operandi seemed to be quantitative support, because the criteria for evaluating officials' performance are based on, inter alia, numbers (that is, number of schools visited) rather than the impact of the

interventions. The officials explained that it takes too long to visit some schools because an individual official has to deal with too many of them and the rigidity of the system aggravates this situation. The system credits those officials who visit more schools at the expense of those who visit fewer schools because they spend time providing quality support at each institution. The GDE should consider impact assessment of capacity-building interventions as a criterion for performance measurement, rather than using only the number of supported schools per official, which does not show the quality of the support provided.

In fact, the system should use both qualitative and quantitative performance measurement tools because the two are complementary. Owing to the quantitative performance measurement tools, we can, for instance, appreciate the fact that 'during the 2013 academic year, the Department delivered education services to 2 846 institutions which constitutes Primary, Secondary, LSEN [Learners with Special Educational Needs], Adult Education and Training (AET) and Further Education and Training institutions with 2 361 400 learners in total' (GDE 2014: 23).

Capacity building

It appears that the GDE's capacity-building philosophy is that through the provision of short courses and other on-the-job training, officials will eventually be capacitated. While this end result may eventually be achieved, the GDE does not seem to have had a good sense of the implications of this approach. For instance, it is not clear how many short courses and other on-the-job training sessions would be required to get the officials to clearly understand their new roles. It is also not clear how long it would take to capacitate the officials, although a three-year capacity-building plan was envisaged to work, but the

conceptual basis for this assumption was not clear.

Moreover, everything has a ripple effect in the system. Where management is weak, the schools tend to be underperforming, and this is partly attributed to the inadequate support they receive due to lack of collaboration by the teachers. The lack of collaboration is characterised by, inter alia, non-attendance of capacity-building workshops. The irony of poorly performing schools is that they are the very same schools whose teachers do not attend these workshops. However, the perceived lack of collaboration is sometimes a reflection of the school's resources. Workshop non-attendance, for instance, may be due to a lack of money for transporting teachers to the workshop venue, an example of how the system tends at times to be self-defeating to the detriment of the learners.

Management

Some district officials expressed dissatisfaction with the 'support' concept as it seemed to be endless. For instance, with respect to poorly performing principals and teachers, one area of frustration is the experience of some circuit managers who follow all the procedures and apply all the applicable corrective measures without achieving the desired outcomes. In such cases, they find themselves unable to apply the next steps, which are punitive, because principals and teachers are not appointed by the district and therefore cannot be fired by the district. The district may facilitate processes to ensure rooting out of bad elements from the system, but in reality this is a time-consuming endeavour and the systems are weak, to the extent that many officials simply resort to tolerating the problematic staff. However, it is important to quantify judgements such as the perceptions of slow and weak

GDE systems. Although it does not show how long it took to conclude each case, evidence indicates that inappropriate behaviour is dealt with, as the services of 113 GDE employees were terminated in 2013/14, 100 employees in 2011/12, and 75 employees in 2010/11 (GDE 2011, 2012, 2104).

Moreover, many officials were of the view that the responsiveness to reported problems at schools is slow, although the slowness is not quantified. The officials felt that they have no recourse as they merely write one report after the other with nothing happening thereafter. Consequently, some have developed the attitude of 'What's the point of reporting when nothing gets done?' The endless submission of reports without positive outcomes was viewed by the officials as a waste of time and paper – valuable and scarce resources in the department.

Another management challenge was the balance between ensuring clean governance and the delegation of powers to ensure quick decision-making and effective service delivery. Some officials felt that the district office is merely a conduit office with no budget and with insufficient decision-making powers for quick delivery of resources. One example given in this regard was infrastructure decay, which is aggravated by budget constraints. Small problems become big problems as a result of neglect and lack of operational budget. For instance, loose roof tiling, which requires a simple fix, ends up requiring renovation of the classrooms as the unattended-to problem leads to damages in the roof, ceiling and walls. The challenge of the lack of resources is, to some extent, a consequence of poor financial management and facilities management at some schools, as well as a reflection of the capacity of school governing bodies and school management teams (SMTs).

Communication

A multilayered structure such as the GDE requires an effective communication system. This is an area in which the GDE still needs to improve, as some participants observed weak communication and poor support for the district from the provincial department. The weak communication phenomenon seems to be prevalent in all GDE levels and manifests in the clash of plans and activities. While all the stakeholders serve one client (that is, the schools), the poor communication challenge translates to a considerable waste of time and other resources because it is reported that sometimes a message about the officials' school visit may not be passed to the teachers. When the officials arrive at a school, the teachers would be busy with something else, and thus the officials would have to leave without spending time with the teachers who require support. The weak communication infrastructure and inadequate resources translate to scenarios such as instead of spending R5 on a five-minute phone call to a school, officials spend R200 and three hours on the road driving to a school merely to deliver a message.

Planning and coordination

Planning is one of the key requirements for successful execution of a task or implementation of a policy. The National Planning Commission bemoaned the lack of integrated planning in government as individual departments seemed to have built walls around themselves, thus 'making it almost impossible to plan across borders or to collaborate' and thereby hindering development (NPC 2013: 273). This phenomenon was also observed by GDE officials. It was reported that when the district was doing its annual operational planning, information was sometimes not forthcoming from the provincial department about its plans, so these could not be integrated into the district's plans. It cannot be

overemphasised that the plans of the national department, provincial department, district office, circuit office and schools should, whenever possible, be jointly made, and widely communicated in a timely manner.

In the absence of integrated planning, some participants noted that the dominant mode of operation in the GDE is problem solving. There are always problems to be solved and the sources of the problems vary. Some problems are a result of poor or uncoordinated planning between the role players. Other problems are caused by the many directorates at the provincial office that all give instructions to the district without communicating with one another. Sets of instructions from the same provincial office sometimes clash or contradict one another, typical of 'the left hand not knowing what the right hand is doing' phenomenon.

A disjointed and non-aligned plan is very frustrating and counterproductive as it manifests as asymmetrical power relations within the system. In a clash of plans and activities, it is usually the plans of the most powerful that succeed. The less powerful feel undermined and taken for granted, as some district officials felt when the provincial office imposed its plans in their district. The GDE needs to engage in meaningful planning and implementation: that is, planning with all the stakeholders, providing a budget for implementation of the plan, communicating the plan, monitoring and evaluating it, and making necessary adjustments as informed by lessons from the implementation process.

Performance management

Problem solving in schools is sometimes delayed due to several factors, such as inaction by the people concerned, inability to address the problem, and the system operations. Sometimes the officials' recommendations are ignored by SMTs. Unfortunately, many officials think

there is nothing they can do because SMTs are not held accountable; there are no consequences for their inaction.

Consequently, some officials were of the view that the system promotes teacher underperformance. This is depicted in the case of the Secondary School Improvement Programme (SSIP), which allegedly encourages teachers not to teach during the week because students will attend some kind of intervention programme over weekends. Teachers take advantage of the SSIP opportunity by collaborating with the people who run these intervention programmes to ensure extra income for themselves. The teachers' role in this regard is to create a demand for the SSIP service providers and thereby get remunerated according to the demand levels. In spite of the 'behind-the-scenes' account, the Sci-Bono Discovery Centre (2015: 1), which facilitates the SSIP programme, claims that this programme 'has been seen as largely responsible for the improvements in the 2010 and 2011 Gauteng Grade 12 results'. It further claims that because of the SSIP programme, the GDE won the 2014 United Nations Public Service Award.

The lack of consequences for non-performance is one of the main factors that compromise the quality of education in South Africa. According to former Auditor-General Terence Nombembe, the pervasive lack of consequences in government departments is a significant contributor to poor service delivery. He argues that when officials realise that there are no consequences for their underperformance or misdemeanours, even those 'who previously complied with legislation and who diligently performed their duties may become disillusioned and may also start to transgress. The ultimate effect of the lack of consequences is poor service delivery, poor financial management, and unreliable financial and service delivery reporting' (Nombembe 2013: 104).

Attitudes

Due to the limitations in the system such as lack of resources, improvisation is a common practice. However, it is reported that officials sometimes find a way of beating the system and improvise for their own benefit. A case in point is the selective reporting practised by some officials. A poorly performing school reflects negatively on the officials who are responsible for supporting it, because the poor performance suggests that they are not doing their jobs well. Officials sometimes report only that which reflects positively on them and sweep the negative issues under the carpet. Because problems are not attended to, they grow over time.

The participants also reported a number of fraudulent practices by teachers, such as the submission of thumb-sucked learner marks for activities the learners had not actually done. Such practices, particularly with respect to the administration of formative and summative assessments, compromise the reliability of learners' results. This has several negative implications, such as compromising the employability of learners and depriving them of the support interventions they need. Triangulating the reports is thus important to ensure their reliability, as this exercise can expose at least some of these fraudulent practices.

Moreover, the quality of teaching is sometimes compromised by lack of will, poor attitudes or personal reasons on the part of teachers. (An example is infighting, which translates to acts of rebellion such as refusing to teach, or doing it merely for compliance, and filling in the forms to confirm that activities were completed.) Lack of will and poor attitudes, together with a culture of negligence, are also prevalent among parents, as evidenced by their reluctance to attend meetings and their failure to support children in

doing their homework. The low rate of meeting attendance by parents is an irony, because when they are expected to pay fees, they often claim that they are not working and therefore cannot pay. However, when parents are invited to meetings held during the day, they claim that they are at work and thus cannot attend.

Conclusion

The implementation challenges of the new district realignment policy echo the 'good policies, poor implementation' narrative that is often associated with policy implementation in South Africa. Successful policy implementation requires adequate provision of the necessary prerequisites for implementation, such as buy-in by policy implementers, clarity of policy objectives, and availability of human, financial and material resources. The weak communication and advocacy of this policy translated to unfavourable perceptions, as the officials felt they had been reduced to generalists. It is also important to understand that performance measurement is a qualitative exercise, which should be reflected in measurement mechanisms. Merely reporting on the number of schools visited is not helpful for gauging the impact of capacity-building interventions.

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