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SUPERVISION AS A MECHANISM FOR ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING: POLICY IMPLEMENTATION INSIGHTS FROM MUNICIPAL INSTITUTIONS

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ABSTRACT:

This article explores the role of supervision as a mechanism for organizational learning within municipal institutions, with particular focus on policy implementation. While municipalities are tasked with implementing developmental policies that directly affect citizens' quality of life, they often face challenges such as limited capacity, policy incoherence, and poor performance outcomes. Supervision, when strategically applied, provides opportunities for continuous feedback, knowledge sharing, and adaptive learning within organizations. This study adopts a qualitative document analysis approach, reviewing municipal audit outcomes, policy implementation reports, and recent scholarly literature (2020–2025). Findings indicate that supervision enhances organizational learning by facilitating iterative reflection on policy implementation processes, identifying gaps between policy design and practice, and institutionalising corrective measures. Municipalities that embed supervision into policy implementation frameworks demonstrate greater adaptability, improved compliance, and more effective service delivery outcomes. However, learning is constrained by factors such as hierarchical cultures, political interference, and limited

supervisory capacity. The study employs Organizational Learning Theory and Systems Theory to explain how supervision facilitates knowledge transfer, institutional memory, and adaptive governance. Implications highlight that supervision should not be viewed narrowly as compliance but as an enabler of organizational learning and innovation. Recommendations include integrating reflective supervisory practices into policy implementation cycles, capacitating supervisors with learning-oriented tools, and fostering collaborative learning platforms. This article contributes to the growing discourse on public sector learning by conceptualising supervision as a strategic mechanism for enhancing municipal performance and policy effectiveness.

KEYWORDS

Supervision, Organizational Learning, Policy Implementation, Municipal Institutions, Governance.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Municipalities in South Africa occupy a critical position in the governance architecture: they are the sphere of government closest to citizens, charged with translating national development priorities into concrete local realities (GCIS, 2024). Despite this centrality, many municipalities struggle to deliver on this mandate. Auditor-General reports consistently point to systemic failures, including compliance lapses, weak financial controls, and poor accountability, that undermine developmental outcomes (AGSA, 2023; Shava, 2025). These challenges persist even though South Africa has established comprehensive legislative instruments, such as the Municipal Systems Act and the Municipal Finance Management Act, intended to ensure sound governance, financial probity, and effective service delivery. Historically, supervision within municipal institutions has often been framed narrowly as a mechanism of control: ensuring that officials comply with rules, procedures, and budgetary constraints. Under this paradigm, supervisory authority tends to be exercised through top-down inspections, audits, and performance reviews, primarily aimed at detecting non-compliance and enforcing corrective action. However, this traditional control-centric model has significant limitations. It often fails to address the root causes of poor performance, such as limited institutional capacity, knowledge deficits, and contextual complexity, and may even discourage innovation by penalising experimentation.

In contrast, a growing body of scholarship suggests that supervision can be reconceptualised more dynamically, not merely as oversight, but as a driver of organizational learning. When

structured as a learning mechanism, supervision becomes a vehicle for continuous reflection, adaptation, and improvement. Rather than focusing solely on fault-finding, it opens up space for mutual feedback, shared inquiry, and problem-solving. This shift aligns with the argument that municipalities must become “learning organizations” to navigate the highly complex, politically charged, and resource-constrained environments in which they operate (Shava, 2024). Recent empirical studies support this learning-oriented view. For instance, research by Shava (2024) deployed Senge’s learning-organization model across multiple municipal contexts, and found that continuous learning frameworks help mitigate bureaucratic inefficiencies, foster innovation, and improve service delivery outcomes. However, such transformation is far from straightforward. Challenges such as political interference, high staff turnover, and entrenched resistance to change often limit the adoption of learning culture in local government (Shava, 2024). These findings highlight that supervision, to be effective as a learning mechanism, must contend with deeply rooted institutional and cultural obstacles.

Another dimension of learning-oriented supervision in the municipal context is knowledge management (KM). Knowledge management involves systematically capturing, sharing, and applying organizational knowledge, thereby strengthening institutional memory and making learning more sustainable. Research in South African local government suggests that effective KM is critical for enabling municipalities to use the diverse expertise of their staff, avoid duplication of mistakes, and institutionalise lessons learned (LGSETA, 2023). However, as the Local Government Bulletin notes, the current state of KM in many municipalities is weak: knowledge-sharing remains fragmented, mentorship structures are underdeveloped, and technology platforms for learning and information exchange are underused (LGSETA, 2023). Supervisory practices, when combined with strong KM systems, can therefore play a pivotal role in enhancing municipal resilience. Rather than merely reacting to audit findings or crisis, municipalities can engage in continuous cycles of evaluation, learning, and adaptation, refining how they implement policy, manage risk, and deliver services. In effect, supervision becomes a formative process, cultivating institutional capability rather than imposing sanctions.

At the same time, oversight remains indispensable. Councillors, for example, have a constitutional mandate to oversee municipal administration. Yet, empirical research shows that councillors often lack the preparation and capacity to fulfil their oversight role

effectively. Fourie and Van der Waldt (2023) found that many oversight committee members are ill-prepared, despite formal structures for accountability being in place. Their study recommends enhanced training, better access to technological tools for tracking performance, and improved formal support (Fourie & Van der Waldt, 2023). This underscores that even learning-oriented supervision must co-exist with robust accountability mechanisms. Further complicating this landscape is the implementation of human resource reforms, such as the Municipal Staff Regulations (MSR), which were introduced to professionalise local government by standardising HR practices around recruitment, performance management, and training (Local Government Bulletin, 2025). Research into MSR implementation reveals that line managers need targeted support, including coaching, mentoring, and evidence-based training, to assume supervisory roles effectively. Without this, the supervisory dimension of learning risks being superficial, purely procedural rather than genuinely developmental (Local Government Bulletin, 2025).

Given this context, this article argues that supervision, when reframed and operationalised as a mechanism for organizational learning rather than solely control, can significantly enhance municipal institutions' capacity, adaptability, and service delivery effectiveness. The primary objectives of the study are threefold: (1) to investigate how supervision fosters organizational learning in municipal institutions; (2) to assess the role of supervisory practices in policy implementation and service delivery; and (3) to recommend strategies for embedding learning-oriented supervision within municipal governance. The guiding research question is: **How does supervision function as a mechanism for organizational learning in municipal policy implementation?** In addressing this question, the study aims to bridge the gap between accountability-focused models of supervision and more transformative, learning-based approaches, thereby contributing to both theory and practice in South African local governance.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Organizational learning has become an important focus of contemporary public administration research, particularly due to its relevance for institutional adaptability, service delivery improvement, and policy implementation effectiveness. Foundational scholarship by Argyris and Schön laid the conceptual groundwork for understanding learning within organizations, particularly through their theories of single-loop and double-loop learning. Although their original work predates current studies, recent scholarship continues to apply

their theoretical insights to public sector institutions, including local government. Contemporary research argues that municipalities operating in complex governance settings must embrace continuous learning processes to respond effectively to dynamic service delivery demands, citizen expectations, and shifting policy environments (Ndevu & Muller, 2020; Sebake & Sebola, 2021). This section reviews recent scholarship on organizational learning, supervision, municipal governance, and policy implementation to illuminate the relationship between supervisory practices and learning dynamics in local government institutions.

Organizational Learning in the Public Sector

Over the past decade, organizational learning has gained traction within public sector management literature as scholars argue that governmental institutions must cultivate adaptive capacities to remain effective. Ndevu and Muller (2020) found that municipalities that adopt learning-oriented practices, such as structured reflection, knowledge sharing, and iterative problem-solving, tend to exhibit greater responsiveness to service delivery challenges. Their study, grounded in empirical evidence from South African municipalities, highlights that internal learning systems help institutions navigate complex and uncertain governance environments. Research also shows that organizational learning is closely tied to performance improvement. Bryson et al. (2021) argue that public institutions benefit from shared sense-making processes that allow employees to interpret policy demands, internalize organizational goals, and collaboratively craft appropriate responses. These processes are particularly important in decentralized governance contexts, where accountability structures and decision-making authority are distributed across multiple actors. Furthermore, learning in the public sector is shaped by formal and informal processes. Formal mechanisms include training programmes, performance reviews, and institutionalized knowledge management systems, while informal mechanisms may involve mentoring, peer collaboration, and experiential learning. Shava (2024) demonstrates that continuous learning initiatives in South African municipalities help reduce bureaucratic inertia, promote innovation, and strengthen institutional resilience. Through learning frameworks inspired by Senge's concept of the learning organization, municipalities are encouraged to build collective leadership capacity, cultivate shared visions, and institutionalize reflective practice. However, the literature also underscores that public sector organizations often struggle to implement learning frameworks effectively. Challenges include resource constraints, political interference, fragmented departmental communication, and bureaucratic cultures resistant to change (Dzansi &

Mogashoa, 2021). Such obstacles limit the uptake of learning practices and weaken organizational capacity.

Theoretical Perspectives on Organizational Learning

Argyris and Schön's concepts of single-loop and double-loop learning remain central to understanding institutional learning. Single-loop learning focuses on improving actions to achieve existing goals, while double-loop learning involves critically examining underlying assumptions, norms, and policies. Recent studies show that double-loop learning is especially important in the public sector, where complex challenges demand not only adjustments to existing procedures but also shifts in institutional mindsets and governance approaches (Botha, 2022). Botha (2022) argues that double-loop learning is critical for long-term policy effectiveness because it encourages organizations to interrogate their internal structures and decision-making processes. This deeper form of learning enables public institutions to better align their strategies with evolving societal needs and to innovate in response to governance failures. In municipal contexts, double-loop learning can help institutions move beyond compliance-oriented governance toward adaptive and developmental governance models. Another important theoretical perspective is the systems-thinking approach. Systems thinking emphasizes the interconnectedness of organizational processes, stakeholder relationships, and feedback loops. Shava (2024), applying systems-thinking principles to local government, asserts that municipalities benefit from understanding how policies, institutional cultures, and administrative behaviors interact. Systems thinking also encourages holistic problem-solving, which can enhance service delivery outcomes and institutional learning.

Supervision in Public Administration

Supervision plays a central role in shaping organizational behaviour and institutional performance in the public sector. Traditionally, supervision has functioned as a compliance mechanism, reinforcing adherence to rules and monitoring performance to ensure accountability. However, emerging scholarship argues that supervision can facilitate learning when it incorporates reflective dialogue, coaching, mentoring, and participatory decision-making. Supervisory practices in municipal government often form part of broader performance management systems. As Botha (2022) notes, performance management can generate feedback loops that promote double-loop learning by prompting employees to challenge assumptions and evaluate the effectiveness of policy implementation. Such supervision-driven feedback mechanisms create opportunities for shared reflection, collective

problem-solving, and knowledge integration. Recent literature also highlights the importance of relational supervision. According to Ndevu and Muller (2020), effective supervisors build trust, encourage open communication, and support staff development. These relational dynamics help create a learning culture where employees feel safe to share insights, question procedures, and experiment with new solutions. Although, supervision within South African municipalities often remains entrenched in hierarchical and compliance-based practices. Madumo (2020) argues that many supervisors focus narrowly on rule enforcement and procedural adherence, leaving little room for learning-oriented interactions. As a result, supervision frequently becomes punitive rather than developmental, stifling creativity and reducing employees' willingness to engage in reflective practice. Moreover, supervisory capacity is often weak. Fourie and Van der Waldt (2023) found that oversight and supervisory committee members in municipalities often lack the technical and managerial skills required to facilitate learning. Without adequate training and knowledge, supervisors may struggle to provide constructive feedback or guide reflective processes.

Municipal Context and Policy Implementation

Policy implementation is a complex process involving interpretation, adaptation, resource mobilisation, and coordination among various actors. Municipalities are at the frontline of policy implementation, translating national objectives into local programmes and services. However, many municipalities face persistent challenges such as capacity deficits, political interference, weak intergovernmental coordination, and chronic financial mismanagement (AGSA, 2023; Shava, 2025). Research shows that municipalities with stronger organizational learning mechanisms perform better in implementing policies. Ndevu and Muller (2020) emphasize that learning allows municipalities to understand implementation gaps, anticipate risks, and adopt more effective strategies. Learning also supports evidence-based decision-making, which is crucial for resource allocation, procurement, and service delivery. At the same time, municipal environments are characterized by high levels of uncertainty and complexity. Service delivery challenges often involve multiple stakeholders, conflicting interests, and resource constraints. In such contexts, learning-oriented supervision can help municipalities remain adaptive and responsive. For example, Shava (2024) found that learning frameworks enabled local government departments to identify systemic bottlenecks and redesign processes to improve efficiency. Therefore, research suggests that many municipalities struggle to institutionalize learning within their implementation processes. Dzansi and Mogashoa (2021) report that hierarchical cultures, siloed communication, and

limited learning incentives undermine learning uptake. These structural and cultural barriers weaken supervisory effectiveness and impede policy implementation.

Supervision as a Mechanism for Organizational Learning

Although organizational learning and supervision have been studied separately in public administration literature, there is limited empirical research examining their intersection within local government. This is a critical gap because supervision is a primary point of interaction between senior managers and frontline staff, making it a potentially powerful tool for facilitating learning. Supervision can support organizational learning in several ways:

Creating Feedback Loops

Supervisory feedback is central to both single-loop and double-loop learning. Regular feedback sessions provide employees with insights into their performance and areas for improvement. Botha (2022) argues that when supervisors encourage employees to question underlying assumptions, it fosters deeper learning and improves decision-making.

Facilitating Knowledge Sharing

Supervisors often act as intermediaries between senior management and frontline workers. They are well-positioned to disseminate information, align team efforts with organizational goals, and facilitate knowledge transfer. Shava (2024) notes that knowledge-sharing structures are essential for institutional memory and learning continuity.

Encouraging Reflective Practice

Reflective supervision encourages employees to critically assess their actions, reflect on experiences, and draw lessons for future improvement. Such practices are vital for developing adaptive skills and fostering innovation.

Promoting Staff Development

Effective supervisors mentor employees, support professional growth, and cultivate a learning culture. Research shows that developmental supervision is associated with improved job satisfaction, staff retention, and organizational performance (Fourie & Van der Waldt, 2023).

Enhancing Problem-Solving and Decision-Making

Supervision that embraces collaborative dialogue helps organizations respond to emerging challenges more effectively. Ndevu and Muller (2020) argue that learning-oriented supervisory practices enhance collective problem-solving and support the implementation of more contextually appropriate solutions. Despite these potential benefits, supervision in many municipalities remains rule-bound and compliance-driven. Studies show that supervisory

practices often focus narrowly on completing checklists, meeting deadlines, and enforcing regulations. While these functions are important, they limit opportunities for deeper learning and adaptive reasoning (Madumo, 2020).

Barriers to Learning-Oriented Supervision

Several structural and cultural barriers hinder the role of supervision as a learning mechanism in municipalities:

- Hierarchical cultures discourage open communication and limit opportunities for staff to question procedures.
- Capacity deficiencies among supervisors reduce their ability to facilitate reflective learning.
- Compliance-dominated performance systems prioritize control over development.
- Political interference in administrative processes can disrupt learning initiatives and weaken supervisory authority.
- Fragmented communication reduces knowledge-sharing and institutional coherence.
- These constraints point to the need for deliberate strategies to embed learning within supervision, including training supervisors, redesigning performance systems, and promoting a culture of reflective practice.

Addressing the Research Gap

While organizational learning has received significant scholarly attention, little research directly explores how supervision facilitates learning in municipal policy implementation. Most studies focus on general learning frameworks, governance reforms, or performance management systems, without considering supervision as an explicit mechanism for generating learning processes. This study seeks to fill this gap by examining how supervisory practices contribute to organizational learning within South African municipalities. By integrating insights from organizational learning theory, public sector supervision, and municipal governance, the study offers a more nuanced understanding of how learning-oriented supervision can enhance policy implementation outcomes.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This research is underpinned by two complementary theoretical lenses, Organizational Learning Theory and Systems Theory, which together provide a robust conceptual foundation

for understanding how supervision functions as a conduit for institutional learning, adaptation, and resilience in municipal governance.

Organizational Learning Theory

At the core of this study lies Organizational Learning Theory, particularly the conceptual schema developed by Argyris and Schön, which distinguishes between *single-loop* and *double-loop learning*. While their seminal work dates further back, contemporary research continues to apply and refine their ideas in public administration settings (Botha, 2022; Riggins Medina, 2024).

- Single-loop learning refers to corrective actions that respond to errors within existing strategies, without questioning the underlying assumptions or policies.
- Double-loop learning, by contrast, involves reflection on the deeper values and governing variables that inform action, allowing an organization not only to correct errors but also to reconsider its strategies, norms, and mental models (Clark, 2021; Blaak, 2023).

In municipal institutions, supervision provides a practical mechanism to foster this double-loop learning. As supervisors offer feedback, probe root causes, and encourage critical reflection, they can help staff and leadership examine the assumptions driving policy and practice. This aligns with modern applications of Argyris and Schön's theory, where feedback and reflection are central for enabling institutional transformation (Botha, 2022). Recent scholarship emphasises that double-loop learning is particularly important in public organizations because of the complexity and contested nature of public service. When supervisors challenge entrenched beliefs—and institutional routines—they lay the groundwork for meaningful reform rather than superficial adjustments (Blaak, 2023). This capacity for adaptive learning is essential in municipal contexts, where service delivery failures often stem not just from execution gaps but from flawed assumptions embedded in institutional processes. Moreover, organizational learning theory underlines the importance of developing a *learning climate*. Argyris and Schön describe two “learning models”: Model O-I (defensive routines, closed communication) and Model O-II (open inquiry, trust, and shared reflection) (Botha, 2022). Supervisory practices that foster trust, open communication, and reflective inquiry help shift the organization toward a Model O-II environment, thus supporting sustained double-loop learning and internalization of lessons. Contemporary studies also emphasise *deutero-learning* (learning to learn): the capacity of organizations not only to learn from experience but to reflect on how they learn (Botha, 2022). Supervisors

who regularly cycle through feedback, learning, and meta-reflection facilitate this process. Over time, the supervisory system itself becomes more adaptive; the organization becomes aware of its learning habits, recognizes obstacles in how it acquires knowledge, and redesigns its mechanisms for knowledge generation. This reflexive capacity contributes to institutional resilience and long-term transformation.

Systems Theory

Complementing organizational learning theory, Systems Theory conceptualizes municipalities as complex, adaptive systems, networks of interacting sub-systems (political leadership, administration, communities, oversight bodies) embedded in broader socio-political environments (Ntando, 2025; DUT-thesis author, 2022). Systems thinking illuminates how supervision is not an isolated process but part of a larger system of relationships, flows, and feedback mechanisms. From a systems perspective, supervision has multiple functions:

- **Coordination and Integration:** Supervisory processes help bind disparate parts of the municipal system. By aligning the work of frontline staff with strategic objectives, supervisors ensure coherence across units. This systemic coordination is essential in institutions where departmental silos and fragmented communication undermine policy implementation (DUT-thesis author, 2022).
- **Feedback Loops:** Systems theory highlights the importance of feedback as a driver of system adaptation. Supervisory feedback can be conceived as a feedback loop: inputs (performance data, observations) circulate back into the system, prompting reflection and recalibration. When designed for learning rather than merely control, these loops facilitate adaptive responses to shifting policy demands or environmental disruptions (Ntando, 2025).
- **Resilience and Adaptability:** In complex governance environments, systems must be resilient. Supervisory structures that incorporate systems thinking help municipalities anticipate, absorb, and adapt to shocks—whether financial crises, political instability, or service backlogs. By embedding learning-oriented supervision, the municipality becomes more of a learning system rather than a rigid bureaucratic machine.
- **Boundary Management:** Systems theory also recognizes that municipal governance involves interactions with actors outside formal administrative boundaries—citizens, civil society, intergovernmental agencies, and political stakeholders. Supervisors operating

with a systems mindset are more attuned to external signals and stakeholder dynamics, enabling them to mediate and coordinate across boundaries.

Integrative Insights

- Combining these two theories, organizational learning and systems theory, offers powerful insights into the role of supervision in municipal policy implementation:
- Supervision as a Learning Mechanism: From the organizational learning angle, supervision is not just about control but also about *enabling learning*. Supervisors act as catalysts for reflection, inquiry, and transformation (Botha, 2022). They help staff both to correct errors (single-loop) and to challenge assumptions (double-loop).
- Supervision as a Systemic Lever: From the systems perspective, supervision supports structural coherence and systemic adaptation. Supervisory feedback loops, when properly structured, become points of systemic learning and change (Ntando, 2025). They integrate departmental functions, align disparate actors, and respond to internal and external disruptions.
- Institutional Resilience: The synergy of learning theory and systems theory suggests that supervision, if reconfigured as a learning process embedded within a systemic framework, can strengthen both *institutional learning capacity* (through double-loop and deutero-learning) and *resilience* (by improving adaptability and coherence across the governance system).
- Policy Implications: Theoretically, this framework implies that reforms to municipal supervision should not merely focus on compliance metrics and performance indicators. Instead, they should embed reflective feedback mechanisms, meta-learning practices, and system-wide alignment. Effective supervision thus becomes a strategic intervention, shaping not just individual behaviour, but institutional culture and system architecture.

Relevance to the Study

In the context of South African local government, where municipalities often face resource constraints, political volatility, and capacity deficits (National Treasury, 2022), this combined framework is particularly apt. By studying supervision through both organizational learning and systems thinking lenses, this research can unpack how supervision contributes to learning, adaptation, and resilience in municipal institutions. It allows for an analysis that is sensitive to both the micro-level (supervisor–employee interactions, feedback practices) and macro-level (institutional structures, inter-system dynamics), thus providing a comprehensive

theoretical foundation for investigating supervision as a mechanism for organizational learning.

METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative document-analysis design to explore how supervisory practices shape organizational learning and policy implementation in South African municipalities. Qualitative document analysis is appropriate where the research question focuses on processes, meanings and institutional practices embedded in written records; it allows researchers to reconstruct institutional dynamics from available artefacts, triangulate findings across sources, and generate theoretically informed explanations without primary data collection (Morgan, 2022; Moilanen, 2022). The approach was deliberately chosen because it draws on publicly available records (audit reports, performance assessments, policy documents) that directly speak to supervisory practices, performance management and institutional responses to implementation problems, thereby avoiding the need for primary fieldwork and ethical clearance while still producing robust analytical insight.

Data sources and sampling

The dataset comprises three complementary classes of secondary sources, collected for the period 2020-2025:

- Oversight and audit records -Auditor-General of South Africa (AGSA) municipal audit reports and related consolidated summaries (selected years 2020-2024) were used to capture official assessments of municipal governance, control weaknesses, and recurring supervisory failures. AGSA reports provide authoritative diagnostic material about fiscal and performance management which is central to understanding supervision in practice.
- Municipal performance reviews and administrative guidance, Municipal annual reports, performance-assessment documents, and intergovernmental performance reviews were sampled to trace how municipalities report on supervision, training, performance management and corrective actions. National policy documents or circulars (e.g., National Treasury guidance on capacity building and municipal HR practices) were also consulted to situate local practice within the regulatory environment.
- Scholarly and sector literature-Peer-reviewed articles, applied research reports and methodological papers (2020-2025) were used both as data (case studies described in the literature) and as methodological reference points for the analytic strategy (document analysis and thematic coding techniques).

A purposive case-selection strategy was adopted to ensure variation across municipal types and implementation outcomes. Selection criteria included municipal classification (metro, district, local), recent audit outcome (unqualified, qualified, adverse), documented evidence of supervisory reform or learning initiatives, and geographic spread. The purposive sample comprised cases that illustrate (a) relative success in implementing corrective actions and demonstrating learning, (b) persistent implementation failure, and (c) mixed outcomes, enabling comparative insights about the association between supervisory approaches and organisational learning.

Document collection and management

Documents were sourced from official repositories (AGSA website, municipal websites, National Treasury portals) and academic databases. Each document was logged in a master extraction spreadsheet with metadata (title, issuing body, date, municipal identifier, document type, and a brief summary). Documents were imported into qualitative analysis software (NVivo) to support systematic coding, retrieval and transparency. Where documents contained sensitive material not in the public domain, access protocols and anonymisation procedures were followed, but the primary analysis relied on publicly available content.

Analytic approach

The analysis followed a structured, iterative process informed by contemporary guidance on qualitative document analysis and reflexive thematic analysis (Morgan, 2022; Moilanen, 2022; Braun & Clarke, 2023). Key steps were:

- Familiarisation-close reading of each document to identify passages referring to supervision, performance management, training, feedback mechanisms, corrective action and evidence of learning or resistance.
- Developing an initial coding frame-a priori codes were derived from the literature (e.g., “feedback loop”, “double-loop learning”, “capacity constraint”, “political interference”, “knowledge management”) while remaining open to inductive codes that emerged from the data (e.g., “mentorship program”, “audit turnaround task team”). This hybrid approach preserves theoretical sensitivity while allowing new patterns to surface (Moilanen, 2022).
- Iterative coding and theme development-textual segments were coded across the dataset; codes were refined, merged or split through successive readings. Reflexive thematic analysis procedures (Braun & Clarke, 2023) guided the movement from codes to

candidate themes that explain how supervision contributed to (or impeded) learning and implementation outcomes.

- Cross-case comparison-coded themes were compared across municipal types and audit outcomes to identify convergent and divergent patterns. Attention was paid to context: where identical supervisory practices produced different outcomes, the analysis probed contextual moderators (leadership stability, resource levels, councillor oversight capacity).

Trustworthiness and reflexivity

To secure rigour, the study applied established trustworthiness strategies: analyst triangulation (multiple coders reviewed a subsample of documents and resolved discrepancies through discussion), an audit trail (codebook versions, memos and decision logs retained), and negative-case analysis to test rival explanations (Ahmed, 2024; Morgan, 2022). Thick description of cases and methodical linkage between data extracts and analytical claims were used to enhance transferability. Reflexivity was practised through researcher memos that recorded interpretive choices and potential biases; these memos were regularly reviewed in peer debriefing sessions to reduce confirmatory bias (Olmos-Vega, 2023).

Ethical considerations

Because the study relies on publicly available secondary materials (audit reports, municipal annual reports and published scholarship), formal institutional ethical clearance was not required. Nevertheless, ethical research practice was followed: documents that contained personal data were treated in accordance with prevailing privacy norms; interpretations were presented conservatively and corroborated with multiple sources where possible.

Limitations

Document analysis affords rich, unobtrusive access to institutional records but has limitations. Documents are produced for particular purposes and may reflect institutional impression-management; hence findings are contingent on what institutions disclose (Kayesa, 2021). The method cannot capture non-documented interpersonal dynamics or the lived experience of frontline staff, issues that could be explored in future primary research (interviews, observation). Finally, temporal lags between practice and documentation may obscure emergent supervisory changes; the study mitigates this by using documents spanning 2020–2025 and by triangulating across diverse document types.

Conclusion of methodological approach

Overall, the qualitative document-analysis methodology, combining purposive case selection, reflexive thematic coding and explicit trustworthiness measures, provides a transparent and replicable route to examine how supervision operates as a mechanism for organizational learning in municipal policy implementation. The careful triangulation of AGSA assessments, municipal performance reports and scholarly analyses allows the study to generate credible, context-sensitive inferences about the linkages between supervisory practice, institutional learning and policy outcomes.

RESULTS

The qualitative document-analysis of municipal audit reports, performance review documents, and sector research produced detailed insights into how supervision can operate as a mechanism for organizational learning in South African municipalities. The findings portray a dual reality: while structured, learning-oriented supervisory practices can significantly strengthen institutional resilience and policy implementation, many municipalities remain entrenched in compliance-focused, control-driven supervision that constrains learning and adaptation. The key observed patterns are as follows.

Supervision and Adaptation in High-Performing Municipalities

A clear pattern emerges among municipalities that achieved clean or unqualified audit outcomes: these tend to have more structured supervisory systems, which correlate with better adaptation to policy challenges, capacity to correct course, and institutionalisation of learning. For example, the 2022/23 consolidated audit report by the Auditor-General of South Africa (AGSA) notes that a relatively small number of municipalities managed to secure “clean audits”, interpreted by AGSA as indicative of well-functioning control environments, stable leadership, and sound performance and financial reporting practices. In these municipalities, supervisory feedback loops are embedded in performance monitoring and planning processes. Performance reports and follow-up audit response documents reveal that supervisors and senior managers use audit findings and internal review feedback to inform adjustments in planning, resource allocation, and project execution, indicating reflexive learning rather than mere correction. Furthermore, municipalities that responded to past audit findings with capacity-building initiatives, such as internal mentorship or performance coaching, demonstrated improved alignment between their strategic plans (e.g., Integrated Development Plans) and service delivery outcomes. These efforts suggest not just temporary compliance, but sustained institutional learning and adaptive capacity over time. Digital

monitoring and information systems further reinforce this supervisory learning. Where municipalities use performance dashboards or real-time monitoring tools, supervisory oversight can happen without micromanagement, enabling supervisors to generate timely feedback and early-warning signals (e.g., budget variances, service delivery risks). In some high-performing municipalities, such tools are referenced in audit responses and internal performance reviews, and serve as the basis for strategy adjustments and corrective actions. This digital dimension enables supervisory practices to leave a documented trail, institutional memory, enabling subsequent leadership to build on past lessons. In summary, in high-performing municipalities, supervision appears to function not just as oversight but as a generative learning mechanism: one that supports both corrective and adaptive change, strengthens institutional memory, and aligns strategy with implementation.

Compliance-Driven Supervision and Recurrent Failures

In contrast, a large number of municipalities remain stuck in a compliance-driven supervisory paradigm, where supervision focuses narrowly on meeting audit requirements, ticking boxes, and avoiding sanctions, with little concern for deeper learning or institutional development. According to AGSA's 2022/23 report, only 34 of 257 municipalities received clean audit opinions, reflecting systemic weaknesses across local government. Moreover, AGSA highlights that a majority of municipalities continue to receive material findings related to noncompliance, irregular expenditure, and deficiencies in performance reporting. In many cases, performance reports are flagged as containing unreliable or un-useful information, undermining their value for learning or strategic reflection. Underlying these supervisory weaknesses are structural capacity constraints. AGSA's consolidated report notes high vacancy rates in key technical and management positions (finance, IT, performance management), and widespread reliance on external consultants to prepare financial statements, compliance reports, and audit responses. This dependence on external actors means that internal supervisory capacity remains underdeveloped, and learning is rarely institutionalised. Hierarchical organisational culture and political interference further hinder learning-oriented supervision. In many municipalities, supervision remains top-down and directive, leaving little space for participatory problem-solving, staff reflection, or collective learning. This reinforces a culture of control rather than learning, where supervisors seek to avoid audit findings rather than understand and correct root causes. The recent 2023–24 audit cycle illustrates this pattern: even where municipalities spent considerable amounts on consultants, many still failed to rectify recurring control and performance issues. As a result,

many municipalities experience stagnation or regression in audit outcomes, indicating that compliance-driven supervision fails to build sustainable institutional learning or resilience.

Institutional Learning and Service Outcomes

An important dimension of the analysis involves the link between supervisory quality, institutional learning, and service delivery outcomes. While measures of citizen satisfaction are not always included in audit or performance reports, evidence suggests that municipalities which embed supervisory feedback loops and adaptive learning tend to manage service delivery more consistently and resiliently. In municipalities with stronger supervision, internal audit committees, performance reviews, and supervisory feedback inform adjustments to project planning, budget reprioritisation, and resource allocation, especially when service delivery gaps or infrastructure maintenance deficits are flagged. Over time, these responsive adjustments appear in more credible performance reporting, fewer audit qualifications, and more consistent service delivery, especially in core services such as water supply, sanitation, and maintenance of infrastructure. Such municipalities also demonstrate greater resilience in the face of administrative disruption (e.g., leadership changes, budget pressure). Their robust supervisory systems, combined with documented institutional memory, allow them to absorb shocks without collapsing service delivery or control systems. AGSA's reports often cite well-functioning control environments and credible performance data as critical in ensuring service delivery continuity during fiscal or administrative stress.

Conversely, municipalities with weak or compliance-driven supervision tend to exhibit chronic service delivery failures, frequent audit regressions, and persistent control and reporting deficiencies. The lack of meaningful internal feedback, unreliable performance data, and superficial corrective action undermine both accountability and service quality, eroding public trust and institutional legitimacy.

Enablers of Learning-Oriented Supervision

The analysis identified several enablers that appear to support effective, learning-oriented supervision in contexts where institutions perform well:

- Leadership commitment and continuity: Municipalities where senior leadership (mayors, municipal managers, council) consistently support supervisory review, capacity development, and corrective action tend to sustain learning gains. Stable leadership reduces disruptive turnover and preserves institutional memory, providing a favourable environment for learning.

- Capacity development and professionalisation: Where municipalities invest in building internal supervisory capacity, through training, mentorship, coaching, or performance-management skill development, supervisory practices evolve beyond compliance-checking toward developmental engagement and learning facilitation.
- Digital monitoring and information management: Performance dashboards and digital monitoring tools enable supervisors to monitor progress, detect risks early, and provide timely feedback. By documenting supervisory decisions, follow-up actions, and performance outcomes, these tools support institutional memory and learning continuity across political or managerial transitions.
- Institutionalised feedback loops: Regular processes, such as mid-year reviews, audit-response workshops, post-project debriefs, create structured opportunities for reflection, evaluation, and adaptation. Where such loops are formalised and documented, they serve as mechanisms for double-loop learning, contributing to strategic reorientation rather than cosmetic fixes.
- Participatory supervisory practices: Supervisory systems that include input and reflection from multiple levels of staff (not solely senior management) tend to surface tacit knowledge, lived experience and context-specific insights. Such inclusive practices foster ownership of corrective measures and enhance the relevance and effectiveness of interventions.

Barriers to Learning-Oriented Supervision

Despite the potential, several significant obstacles inhibit the transformation of supervision into a sustainable, learning-oriented mechanism:

- Structural capacity deficits: Persistent staff shortages, especially in technical and management roles, undermine the internal competence needed for meaningful supervision and learning.
- Reliance on external consultants: Overdependence on external consultants to address audit findings may temporarily solve compliance problems but does little to build lasting institutional capacity or memory.
- Compliance-oriented performance culture: Where municipal culture prioritises audit outcomes over organizational learning, supervision remains superficial and reactive.
- Unreliable performance data: Performance reports deemed “unusable or unreliable” (by AGSA) undermine supervisory reflection and prevent evidence-based learning.

- Political interference and hierarchical rigidity: Supervisory practice in many municipalities remains top-down and politicised, limiting open discussion, critical reflection, or genuine corrective learning.

DISCUSSION

The findings from the document analysis show that supervision in South African municipalities performs a dual role: it remains an essential accountability instrument, but it also has untapped potential as a central mechanism for organizational learning. When supervision is purposely reconfigured to embed reflective practices, iterative feedback and knowledge capture, municipalities demonstrate greater adaptive capacity, stronger alignment between planning and execution, and improved service outcomes. Conversely, supervision that is narrowly compliance-driven tends to reproduce the same implementation failures and audit regressions. This section situates those empirical patterns within the theoretical lenses of organizational learning and systems thinking, examines enabling and constraining conditions, and outlines implications for policy, practice and future research.

Reinterpreting supervision through learning and systems lenses

The empirical evidence supports the claim that supervision can operate as a generator of both single-loop and double-loop learning. In municipalities where supervisory processes produced consistent feedback loops, through documented review cycles, audit debriefs, and performance dashboard reporting, supervisors and managers were able to use evidence to make corrective adjustments (single-loop learning) and, in several documented cases, to question budgetary priorities or assumptions underpinning implementation plans (double-loop learning). This pattern accords with contemporary applications of Argyris and Schön's learning concepts, which emphasise that effective feedback, safe reflective spaces and managerial coaching are necessary conditions for organizations to shift from routine fixes to deeper institutional change (Shava & Muringa, 2024; Botha, 2022). Systems theory helps explain why these learning processes yield more durable outcomes. Municipalities are complex adaptive systems composed of interdependent units (political leadership, administration, finance, service departments, citizen stakeholders). Supervisory feedback that is timely and system-wide, for example, when performance dashboards inform both operational managers and budget committees, creates coherence across these subsystems and enables coordinated adaptation. In other words, supervision acts as a system-level lever: it channels information flows, exposes bottlenecks, and triggers adjustments across units rather

than only within isolated teams (AGSA, 2024). This explains why municipalities that embedded supervisory feedback into IDP cycles and budget reprioritisation achieved better strategic alignment and fewer recurrent audit qualifications.

Why supervision is often stuck in a compliance trap

Despite the logical fit between learning-oriented supervision and improved municipal outcomes, many municipalities remain in a compliance trap. The analysis identified three structural dynamics that maintain this status quo. First, institutional incentives are skewed toward short-term audit recovery rather than long-term capacity building. Audit findings generate immediate political and administrative pressure; the predictable response is to remediate the specific finding quickly (often via external consultants), which closes the current audit query but does not address root causes or build internal learning capacity (LGSETA, 2023). This audit-driven cycle produces episodic responses rather than continuous improvement. Second, capacity deficits among supervisory cadres seriously constrain the shift to developmental supervision. The AGSA's consolidated local government reports repeatedly highlight vacancies in key positions, reliance on consultants, and limited in-house technical expertise, conditions that make it difficult for supervisors to move beyond checklist enforcement to mentoring, reflective facilitation and systemic problem-solving (AGSA, 2024). Without professional development and role clarity for supervisors, learning initiatives tend to falter. Third, political economy pressures, in particular political interference and highly hierarchical decision-making, reduce psychological safety and block open inquiry. Supervisors who fear reprisals or political fallout are unlikely to surface inconvenient lessons or push for genuine reforms; instead, they emphasise compliance and risk management. The result is a culture where mistakes are hidden, documentation is politicised, and learning is suppressed (Fourie & Van der Waldt, 2023).

Conditions that enable supervision to become a learning mechanism

The findings also clarified concrete enabling conditions that convert supervision from control to learning:

- Leadership commitment and role modelling. Senior municipal leaders who publicly prioritise learning, by endorsing post-audit reflection sessions, investing in supervisor training and permitting experimentation, create an enabling environment. Where mayors and municipal managers champion learning, supervisory feedback tends to be taken

seriously and translated into institutional changes rather than short-term fixes (Shava & Muringa, 2024).

- Institutionalised feedback loops. Municipalities that formalise review cycles (mid-year reviews, post-project debriefs, audit response forums) convert supervisory insights into planned adjustments. These formal mechanisms turn episodic learning into routine practice, embedding lessons into subsequent IDPs and budgets (AGSA, 2024).
- Digital information systems and dashboards. The availability of timely, reliable performance data reduces uncertainty and enables supervisors to provide evidence-based feedback. Dashboards and monitoring platforms (whether municipal or provincial) support both corrective action and institutional memory by capturing trends, decisions and follow-ups in a retrievable form (National Strathub dashboards; GGA governance dashboards).
- Professional development oriented to mentoring and facilitation. Training that focuses on coaching, reflective supervision, and knowledge management helps supervisors to move from directive control to developmental engagement. LGSETA's research highlights that investing in supervisory skills builds internal capacity and reduces dependence on external consultants (LGSETA, 2023).
- Participatory supervisory practices. Supervisory routines that solicit frontline input, participatory problem-solving, peer review, and joint reflection, generate richer sources of knowledge and increase buy-in for corrective measures. These practices help surface tacit knowledge that formal documents might miss and encourage ownership of solutions at the point of delivery.

Implications for policy and practice

The discussion points to several policy-oriented implications that are realistic and actionable. Policy makers should reframe audit cycles and performance oversight to incentivise learning, not merely compliance. National and provincial oversight bodies can amend reporting templates and conditional grant requirements to reward demonstrated institutional learning: for example, municipalities could be required to document post-audit learning plans, show evidence of implementation, and report on capacity-building investments alongside remedial actions. This would shift the focus from “closing the audit” to “closing the learning loop” (AGSA, 2024). Capacity investments should prioritise supervisory effectiveness. Rather than only funding technical consultants for isolated problems, conditional grants and capacity-building programmes (e.g., LGSETA initiatives) should support longer-term mentorship

schemes, coaching for middle managers, and peer learning networks across municipalities. Such investments provide the durable internal capabilities needed to sustain learning (LGSETA, 2023). Digital monitoring must be scaled purposefully. Governments should support standardized, interoperable dashboards that enable consistent data across municipalities and provinces. However, digital tools must be paired with human processes: dashboards are useful only when supervisors use them for dialogue, reflection and corrective action (National Strathub dashboards; Infrastructure SA initiatives). Political actors and councillors should be engaged as partners in learning rather than adversaries. Training for councillors on oversight as developmental (rather than punitive) and clearer role definitions for section-79 committees would improve the quality of political-administrative dialogue. Fourie and Van der Waldt (2023) show that councillors often lack the preparation and tools for effective oversight; addressing this gap is crucial if supervision is to facilitate organizational learning.

Research and methodological implications

Methodologically, the study demonstrates how document analysis can reveal institutional learning patterns across multiple municipalities without primary fieldwork. Still, the approach has limits: documents do not capture informal routines, interpersonal dynamics, or the subtleties of supervisory conversations. Future research should combine document analysis with interviews, direct observation, and action research to unpack how supervisory dialogues produce learning in practice and which interpersonal skills matter most. Research should also probe the political economy of learning: what configurations of political incentives, electoral cycles and administrative careers either support or block learning? Comparative work across provinces and international benchmarking with municipalities in other middle-income countries could clarify which institutional reforms are transferable and which are context-specific.

Limitations

The study's reliance on publicly available documents is both a strength (transparency, replicability) and a limitation (selective disclosure, impression management). Municipal reports and AGSA findings are authoritative but can reflect what organizations are willing to reveal. The study mitigated this risk by triangulating across multiple document types and by focusing on patterns rather than single artifacts, yet the absence of primary interviews means some interpretive claims remain provisional.

CONCLUSION

This study provides compelling evidence that supervision, when intentionally restructured to prioritise learning and adaptation rather than merely compliance, can serve as a powerful mechanism for building organizational capacity and improving policy implementation within municipal institutions. Through a careful analysis of audit reports, municipal performance reviews, and sector-wide documentation, a clear pattern emerges: municipalities that adopt learning-oriented supervisory practices tend to demonstrate greater flexibility, more effective alignment between strategic plans and service delivery, stronger institutional resilience, and more consistent delivery of public services. First, the findings underscore that supervision is not inherently punitive or merely a mechanism for oversight. Rather, in contexts where supervision is embedded within a culture of reflection, feedback, and capacity development, it becomes generative: it supports double-loop learning by encouraging critical reflection on underlying assumptions, fosters institutional memory through documentation and follow-up, and enables course correction over time. In high-performing municipalities, supervisory feedback loops are incorporated into IDP planning cycles, budget reviews, and project tracking processes. This allows for early detection of implementation risks, prompt adjustment of resource allocation, and mitigation of service delivery gaps. As a result, these municipalities not only address immediate compliance issues but also invest in long-term institutional learning, embedding practices that survive leadership transitions, staff turnover, and shifting external pressures. Second, the study highlights the critical role of supervisory capacity, leadership commitment, and digital or institutional infrastructure in enabling learning. Where supervisors are supported with ongoing training, mentorship, and the tools needed for real-time monitoring and documentation, supervision transcends its traditional control-oriented role. It becomes an instrument for knowledge generation, organisational improvement, and adaptive governance. Leadership commitment is especially important: when municipal leadership (senior managers, mayors, councillors) publicly endorses learning-oriented supervision, it signals that reflective practice and institutional development are valued. This, in turn, encourages staff to engage openly in feedback sessions, experimentation, and continuous improvement rather than simply meeting short-term audit requirements. Third, the contrast between learning-oriented and compliance-driven supervision reveals a fundamental insight about institutional culture. In many municipalities, entrenched compliance cultures, frequent capacity gaps, over-reliance on external consultants, unreliable performance information, and political interference combine to stifle

learning. In these contexts, supervision remains reactive and episodic, aimed mainly at avoiding audit sanctions rather than building long-term organizational learning. As a result, audit performance oscillates, service delivery remains unstable, and opportunities for genuine institutional reform are lost. The study demonstrates that without structural change, both in incentives and practices, supervision alone cannot drive sustainable improvement. Given these dynamics, rethinking supervision in municipal governance becomes not just desirable but essential. For supervision to realize its full potential as a learning mechanism, municipalities must commit to reorienting their supervisory frameworks toward reflection, mentorship, capacity-building, and feedback integration. Supervisory processes must become routine sites of learning rather than just channels for compliance. Institutional mechanisms, such as documented feedback loops, performance dashboards, mentorship programmes, and participatory supervision, must be embedded in municipal governance architecture. Leadership commitment, resource allocation, and capacity development are necessary to create and sustain these changes. Finally, the study points to important directions for future research. While the findings provide a strong cross-sectional insight into how supervision can support organizational learning, there remains a need to examine the longitudinal impacts of learning-oriented supervision. Long-term research could assess whether municipalities that invest in supervisory learning structures demonstrate sustained improvements in service delivery, financial management, citizen trust, and institutional resilience over multiple election or audit cycles. Additionally, future studies could investigate how variations in municipal type (e.g., urban versus rural, resource-rich versus resource-poor) influence the effectiveness of supervision as a learning mechanism. Qualitative research, such as interviews or ethnographic observation, could also shed light on interpersonal dynamics, power relations, and cultural conditions that facilitate or inhibit learning within supervisory relationships. In summary, this study affirms that supervision, properly designed and implemented, can be far more than a tool of oversight. It can be an engine of institutional learning, capacity building, and governance reform. For South African municipalities, and potentially for similar local government contexts elsewhere, embracing learning-oriented supervision offers a pathway toward more resilient, responsive, and effective governance.

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