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AN EXPLORATION OF THE PROGRESSION POLICY AND ITS EFFECTS ON LEARNER ACHIEVEMENT IN KWAZULU-NATAL

Thandi Priscillia Nkosi

Corresponding Author: Durban University of Technology, South Africa
Email: thandinkosi00@gmail.com

Rufus Olufemi Adebayo

Durban University of Technology, South Africa
Email: rufusa@dut.ac.za

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Abstract

This article examines the Progression Policy and its effects on learner achievement in the Further Education and Training Phase (Grades 10 to 12) amongst five underperforming public secondary schools in Pinetown. Since the adoption of the Progression Policy, the pass rate noticeably declined between 2014 and 2016. Thus, the Progression Policy is used in this study as an analytical framework, whilst the qualitative research design was used to gather data. The face-to-face semi-structured interviews, as well as focus group discussions with educators and principals, served as data collection methods. This study emphasized challenges attributed to the implementation of the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement and the Progression Policy in the Pinetown District. The study further revealed that the South African education system, from the Foundation Phase level all the way up, is plagued by serious challenges. The identified challenges include a lack of parental support, learner absenteeism, learner indiscipline, learner demotivation, resource allocation, and teacher-learner ratios. The results also revealed that the socioeconomic environment contributes to a dysfunctional condition in schools, which has a negative influence on the teaching and learning experience amongst educators and learners. Thus, the study proposes the reconfiguration of the Progression Policy alongside practicable and relatable recommendations in consonance to study.

Keywords: Learner Achievement, Progression Policy, Promotion, Assessment Of Learners, Learner Motivation, Progressed Learner

1. Introduction

This article aimed to explore the Progression Policy and its effects on learner achievement in the Pinetown District in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. In recent years, learner performance has significantly decreased, especially in summative examinations, which has led to a weakening of the education system (Fomunyam, 2017). The Progression Policy has largely been applied to the General Education and Training (GET) Phase (Grades R to 9) since it was gazetted in 1998.

However, it was only endorsed in the Further Education and Training (FET) Phase in 2013, when it was promulgated in the National Policy Pertaining to the Program and Promotion Requirements of the National Curriculum Statement Grades R – 12 on 12 September 2011 (Department of Basic Education [DBE], 2011). The first cohort of progressed learners pertaining to this study in KwaZulu-Natal reached Grade 12 in 2014. This study investigated the amount of progress made among learners from 2014 within five schools and observed the ramifications of the Progression Policy for the FET Phase.

The new democratic dispensation of 1994 in South Africa was followed by a variety of curriculum amendments aimed at fostering a just and equal society (Ankiewicz, 2020). This was practically to undo the bias policies enacted within the apartheid era (Nkosi, 2014). Hence, since the commencement of this dispensation, the educational sector has taken different directions with the introduction of Curriculum 2005 (C2005) in 1997 and its subsequent revisions, as well as the introduction of the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) in 2012 (Roux, 2020). During this period, learner performance has been rather haphazard. Magano (2009) notes that the reforms around the educational policy will result in a significant improvement in the pedagogy adopted by educators whilst teaching their students. This demonstrates that educators must adapt to this transition with respect to the new curriculum and assessment practices. There is a crisis in the South African education system post-1994, which is evident in the results of several tests and assessment tasks conducted among the youth in the senior and FET phases. The results indicate that most South African learners can neither read nor write nor compute at the level appropriate to their grade (Bayat *et al.* 2014). Most South African learners are functionally illiterate and innumerable (Carnoy and Chisholm, 2008). Modisaotsile (2012) posits that education in South Africa has maintained a state of disrepair as learners' performance continues to decrease consistently.

It is currently observed, within the field of secondary education in South Africa, that there is a major setback in learners' academic achievement. This poses a challenge, especially in terms of the high failure rate in the FET Phase (Grades 10-12) (Klopper, 2021). It is thus imperative to understand some of the progression and promotion policies and their effect on learners' achievement. This article falls in the domain of social and constructivist theory, which provides a meaningful framework to help understand educators' perceptions in the classroom. This research also investigates whether socioeconomic factors contribute to dysfunctional conditions in schools. This research was based in the province of KwaZulu-Natal, with a focus on a sample of five underperforming secondary schools in the Pinetown District. These schools obtained a pass rate of less than 30% in the 2015 Grade 12 examinations. The policy on learners' progression was implemented in 2013 with the proviso that those learners who did not meet the pass requirements in a grade for two consecutive years would be progressed to the next grade (DBE, 2015).

It is pointed out that learners arrive in Grade 10 with expectations of them having acquired or developed a decent understanding of the basic rules of grammar, mathematics, or any other subject; however, this has been shown to be untrue (Kader, 2012). They have little or no background knowledge of concepts pertinent to the success of the subjects they are studying. It is evident that, of the 1,627,004 learners who sat for Grade 12 examinations between 2009 and 2011, 54% failed (Masondo, 2014; Van der Merwe, 2014). The general state of education in South Africa has been shown to be poor and has been attributed to, among other factors, the low quality of teaching and learning (Van der Merwe, 2014).

Various educators from different schools commented on the Outcomes-Based Education (OBE) curriculum and stated that most Grade 7 learners when entering Grade 8, could not read and write or count properly (Kader, 2012). These shortcomings placed the educational system under significant strain, especially when they were taught the OBE style. Progression could have a significant effect on the overall National Senior Certificate (NSC) results. The number of progressed learners has increased significantly in 2016 as a total of 43,071 more pupils were progressed in 2016 (Motshekga, 2016). The novelty of this paper lies in its ability in providing content, discourse, and critique to the Progression Policy among five underperforming public secondary schools in Pinetown; which is yet to be examined by earlier authors or research teams/institutions.

Against this background, this write-up provides pertinent kinds of literature in the next section. Thus, literature relating to Progression policy, as well as curriculum reform are both discussed from a South African perspective. Furthermore, insights are also provided on the academic performance of learners. More so, the later sections provide research design and methodology; key findings, and discussions; whilst a conclusion and recommendations are also provided.

2. Literature review

2.1. Theoretical issues

This literature review presents the context and background of this study and facilitates further insight into the research problem, with a specific focus on literature related to this research study. It reviews existing literature and scholarly works on the Progression Policy in secondary schools in order to gain insight into how it influences learner performance. This article critically examines the implementation of the Progression Policy in underperforming public secondary schools in the Pinetown District, in the KwaZulu-Natal province, for the purposes of addressing the declining pass rate from 2014 to 2016 that was recorded in the Grade 12 national examinations in secondary schools. The article also discusses previous educational policies introduced to improve learner performance, while exploring what is currently happening in the South African education system.

The article reveals gaps in terms of the implementation of education policies and educational outcomes and how these could be a reflection of the key objectives of the Progression Policy in schools (DBE, 2015). Hammonga (2017) states that poor performance is a cause of concern since learners' performance is a vital element that reflects educational outcomes in any education system. This article examines Hammonga's (2017) comments that examination performance reports provide an opportunity to analyze capabilities, knowledge, and learning over the course of a given year as they show the lowest, average, and highest learner achievements in terms of different kinds of assessment tasks in examinations. As this article needs to incorporate aspects of educational policies and reforms, it clarifies previous educational policies and reforms introduced to the South African educational system, and explores the importance of academic achievement and the factors that influence it, while comparing the performance of learners in the Pinetown District in KwaZulu-Natal, in general, before and after the implementation of the Progression Policy.

2.2. Understanding the progression policy in South Africa

Progression, according to the DBE (2011), is defined as the movement of a learner from one grade to the next, excluding Grade R. These learners are exempted from not having complied with all promotion requirements. This policy specifies that, since such learners are likely to repeat the new grade, they must be provided with the necessary support to help them progress to the next grade, with the intended aim of promoting learner dignity, self-esteem, and the need to encourage age-appropriate socialisation (DBE, 2012). The Progression Policy is regarded as one of South Africa's key change vehicles in the education system. According to the Progression Policy, learners are progressed to the next grade even if they fail to meet the promotion requirements. It is employed as a key tool to provide learners with the necessary support they require to achieve policy objectives.

According to Inclusive Education South Africa (2017), the reality for many progressed learners is that they are functioning below grade level and may have a level of learning potential lower than their peers. This is especially true of progressed learners who experience cognitive barriers to learning. The Progression Policy relies on "learner support" being provided by educators in the new grade (Munje and Maarman, 2016). However, it fails to take into consideration issues such as the coping process required by learners, variances in the degree of learner needs and challenges, and the number of learners that need support in each grade at a particular time. In order to ensure that no learner can be retained in a phase for more than four years, a learner may only be retained once in the FET Phase (DBE, 2012). This policy indicates

that a learner who has not met the promotion requirements in either Grade 10 or Grade 11 after repeating the grade may be progressed to the next grade.

According to the DBE (2018), the repetition rate in the South African education system is high, especially from Grade 9 to Grade 11; with Grade 10 recording the highest levels at 22% in 2017. The Learner Unit Record Information and Tracking System is a resource that provides accurate estimates of grade repetition figures; according to which 25% of learners repeated Grade 10 in 2015 (DBE, 2016a). These high repetition rates in the FET Phase, which comprises Grades 10 to 12, are a cause of concern given the value attached to them in determining post-schooling outcomes and labor market access. The completion of Grade 12, as well as higher education qualifications, is directly related to employment outcomes (Moses *et al.* 2017). In this regard, poor schooling outcomes in the FET Phase are largely associated with lower-productivity jobs and lower-income levels, while good schooling outcomes are associated with high-productivity jobs and higher incomes.

2.3. Curriculum reform in South Africa

Nkosi (2014) states that the South African education system has experienced sudden changes in the curriculum. One of these changes was C2005, also known as OBE, which was introduced to deliver the dividends of democracy, namely integration, training, access, and equity, to the education system (Fomunyam, 2017). It was launched in 1997 and became the first major education statement of the democratic South African government as it aimed to desegregate schools, develop admission policy, introduce teacher development strategies, and improve the learning and teaching culture. It called for a form of learner-centered education that placed the teacher in the role of a facilitator (Nyoka, 2014).

The OBE curriculum was criticized due to some challenges that constrained it. For instance, OBE was concerned with focusing on what learners actually learn, and how well they learn it (measured academic results), and not on what learners are supposed to learn. As a result, this led to the introduction of the National Curriculum Statement (NCS) in 2002, the Revised National Curriculum Statement (RNCS) in 2004, and the CAPS in 2012. A brief explanation of the NCS and the CAPS is necessary to grasp their influence on the promotion and progression of learners. The NCS was a result of the problems experienced with C2005. It took over where other policies had left off and it came into being with Grades 10 to 12 as the major priority area. Badugela (2012) states that the NCS focused on the outcome issues of content. However, the desired result was unmet due to the poor training of teachers and lack of resources.

The CAPS was introduced in 2012 in order to prepare and guide teachers in terms of what they should teach in class and how they should assess learners. The CAPS was introduced to identify and solve challenges and pressure points that had a negative impact on the quality of teaching in schools and came with mechanisms that could address those challenges. DBE (2011) states that the CAPS is used as a starting point for filling gaps, reducing repetition, and providing clarity where necessary. For example, learning areas were changed into subjects, and subjects were reduced from eight to six. This, therefore, has implications for the promotion and progression requirements in Grades 10 and 11, whereby progression has been used to prevent a learner from being retained in a phase for longer than four years. The Progression Policy adds to numerous policies that were implemented by the post-apartheid government to redress, readjust, and adapt the curriculum to South Africa's unequal education system. The next section analyzes learners' academic performance.

2.4. Exploring the academic performance of learners

Academic achievement is commonly measured through examinations and continuous assessment. As educators engage in the curriculum plan, learning experiences must engage all learners regardless of their academic and social abilities. Teachers must therefore deviate from educational triage where a large portion of attention is dedicated to learners who are on the margin of scoring at the required level (Booher-Jennings, 2005). Regardless of learner assessment, all learners deserve non-judgmental attention. Goodlad (1999) expresses that

teachers should consider the following: the developmental differences among the learners in each classroom, the mode of learning for each learner, and variable interests, goals, and lifestyles. One approach is the integration of field study to expose students to hands-on experiences and to expand their learning beyond the classroom.

Apart from cognitive abilities, such as intelligence and aptitude, among others, family environment, finances, and other socioeconomic circumstances, the performance of high school learners relies heavily on the quality of the elementary education to which they were previously exposed. A disadvantaged educational background impacts negatively on learners and influences their educational performance as they progress to higher learning (Macha, 2017).

The final school-leaving examination previously known as the Senior Certificate has been replaced with the NSC or Grade 12. The NSC is a national standardized examination that measures the academic performance of South African high school learners via four levels: a bachelor's pass; diploma pass; higher certificate pass, as well as a certificate pass. As stated by Phahlamohlaka (2017), statistics on learners' achievement show that 70% was the overall pass rate for 2015. This is a decline from 78% and 75.8% in 2013 and 2014 respectively. To encourage more learners to sit for and attain a pass rate in their NSC examinations, the Progression Policy was introduced to provide extra support.

3. Research design and methodology

For this research, the researchers employed the use of focus groups and interviews to generate data. To obtain an understanding of the impact of the Progression Policy on the achievement of learners, the use of focus group discussions was pertinent as it is one of the most cost-effective methods of interviewing several people at once. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 educators. The criteria for educator selection were based on experience. As such, only educators who had served for a minimum of 10 years were involved in this study. Their emic perspective and day-to-day experiences provided rich and pertinent discussions. The five selected schools were equally chosen due to their shared commonalities, such as a decline in pass rate, poorly resourced schools, and poor academic reputation. The number of interviews was appropriate because they provided flexibility in posing questions, in-depth discussions, follow-ups, and probes to clarify the responses (Cohen *et al.* 2007). This implies that this research employed a mixed-methods approach.

This research was basically interpretive in nature. A case study approach was employed to collect data. Dunlap *et al.* (2009) define a case study as an experiential inquiry that explores a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context. Five educators (one educator per school) and five School Management Team (SMT) members (one SMT member per school) from five secondary schools were selected. The performance of five different schools enhanced the understanding of the implementation of the Progression Policy. The participants are represented by symbols: "P" for the participant, the letters "A", "B", "C", "D", and "E" combined with "P" for the school name, "FG" for the focus group, and numbers that represent the position of the participant in the particular school; educators are therefore represented as PA1, PB1, PC1, PD1, and PE1. The principals from each school are represented by PA2, PB2, PC2, PD2, and PE2. The five focus group participants who were only drawn from School PB, the lowest-performing, and School PD, the highest performing, are represented as follows: PBFG1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 for School PB, and PDFG1, 2, 3, 4, and 5, for School PD.

The site of the research was five secondary schools in the Pinetown District whose pass rates had declined after the implementation of the Progression Policy in schools in 2014. The majority of learners from these schools are largely from the various communities in the different Circuit Management Centers in the Pinetown District. These schools are also on equal footing in terms of limited resources. These five secondary schools are co-educational township schools that offer only academic subjects and are attended by black learners. The five schools under study were no-fee Quintile 5 public schools located in the Pinetown District and they were selected from 167 schools due to their reputation, contexts, and proximity. According to Neuman (2006, p. 43), a case study is defined as "an in-depth study of one particular case in which the case may be a person, a school, a group of people, an organization, a community, an event, a movement,

or geographical unit”, which are generated through interviews, documents, observations, newspapers, and other sources.

4. Research findings and discussion

The empirical results revealed that schools are facing challenges in the implementation of the Progression Policy. Learners are struggling with the new workload and the lack of foundation, especially in reading and writing. In addition to the implementation of policies, educators need to be supported by the DBE in terms of providing them with resources. Parents are sporadically involved in their children’s education but not fully as expected by the schools. In line with this result, the implementation of the Progression Policy needs to be supported by intensive interventions (in the case of this study) to obtain educators’ and SMT members’ views regarding the impact of the Progression Policy. This has helped schools to implement the Progression Policy to comply with the DBE’s educational policies. The Progression Policy states that there are criteria that need to be followed by the schools for the learners to be progressed to the next grade. However, the following challenges are faced by educators in implementing the Progression Policy in the FET Phase:

- Learners’ performance is decreasing due to knowledge gaps in their learning
- Learners are struggling to cope with the new workload in the current grade
- Learners’ lack of self-esteem
- Lack of parental involvement
- Learners’ lack of confidence.

The results indicate that schools are classified as underperforming schools (below 60%) and performing schools (above 60%). The purpose of implementing a progression policy is to decrease learner dropouts in schools and to increase the number of learners who will exit the system successfully. It was revealed that this policy has become a burden to educators since some learners in the FET Phase are struggling. Furthermore, this research revealed the opinions of the educators regarding the implementation of the Progression Policy and the role of SMTs, and the concept of learner achievement. Some believed that, as an educator or SMT of the school, that one’s responsibility is to implement whatever policy is developed by the policy developers at a higher level.

The first research question sought to determine how “progressed” learners cope with the new workload. Most of the participants revealed that some of the progressed learners are not coping with the new grade workload and are struggling: *“Some of them ended up bunking classes while some others dropped out. They are not co-operative, and they are so demotivated and hopeless”*.

A participant from School C added that *“some of these progressed learners cannot read and write properly because they lack basic skills from the Foundation Phase.”* Another crucial area of being an educator is to be prepared to implement whatever policy came from the DoE, while the implementers were not consulted beforehand. The respondent concluded: *“If the learner misses that good learning foundation, there is no way that that learner will catch up in a higher phase.”*

Educators from Schools A and E appeared to have the same understanding of the Progression Policy. They allege that factors such as the non-involvement of parents, learner absenteeism, and lack of resources are amongst factors affecting learners’ educational development. One of the respondents from School A confirmed that the implementation of the Progression Policy in schools needs to be reviewed by the DoE. Even though the DoE introduced the modularization policy in 2016, *“it needs to be reviewed.”* After the analysis of the results for each term, subject advisors must intervene to support educators.

4.1. The impacts of the progression policy on learners' academic performance

4.1.1. Theme 1: Socioeconomic factors

The first major theme to emerge was the view that the effect of the Progression Policy on learners' performance was extremely challenged by socioeconomic factors, namely lack of parental involvement and learner absenteeism (PA2, PB1, PB2, PC1, PC2, PD1, and PD2). The following sections discuss these sub-themes.

4.1.1.1. Lack of parental involvement

Parents are expected to take an active interest in their children's schoolwork and make it possible for the children to complete their assigned homework (The Presidency, 2011). The participants in the semi-structured interviews emphasized that poor performance among learners was a result of most parents' failure to guide and support their children, both socially and academically. In particular, PC1 noted that due to work commitments, some parents do not monitor their children's schoolwork.

The following are excerpts from the interview: *"Many parents are not involved in the education of their children ... no matter how much the school invited them to attend parents' meetings"* (PA2, PB2). *"A number of parents in these communities are preoccupied with job hunting in order to ensure there is food on the table ... They are not staying at home most of the time"* (PB1).

As stated by PA2, PB2, PC2, PD2, and PE2 during the interviews, the parents do not even attend parents' meetings, where the school wants to address the issue of learner attendance in the classroom. PD2 stated: *"Parents are also encouraged to attend a scheduled meeting with the teachers so that they will monitor school and classroom activities for their children. But still, their attendance is very poor."*

As inferred from participants, lack of parental involvement is at times attributed to parents' low level of educational attainment. Whilst parental involvement has proven to positively impact on learners' competence, performance, and overall academic development (Usher and Kober, 2012). Such involvement is no doubt imperative as learners' success can be linked to a proactive involvement of all stakeholders (Gary and Witherspoon, 2011).

4.1.1.2. Learner absenteeism

PA1, PB2, PB3, PC1, and PD3 indicated that high poverty levels deprive many families of access to basic needs, which in turn affects the children's concentration for learning and create challenges to teach them. PB3 particularly observed that some learners reported to school on empty stomachs and, as argued by scholars such as Maslow (1943), their concentration for learning is likely to be compromised. When learners are absent from school, they tend to miss learning many concepts. Thus, the material taught is difficult to understand when studying alone (Ritchie *et al.* 2013). One of the progression criteria in Circular E22 of 2016 states that in order to be progressed, the learner must attend school on a regular basis (DBE, 2016b). However, if the learner is absent in excess of 20 days without a valid reason, he or she will not be progressed to the next grade.

Excerpts: *"The level of attendance in the classroom is very poor. Some of the progressed learners even bunk classes..."* (PA1, PB2, and PD2). *"We do have afternoon and Saturday classes just for the progressed learners, but the attendance is very poor... most of them do not show up"* (PA2, PB1, PC2, and PD2).

PBFG1 and PEFG2 were of the opinion that attendance was poor and that these learners struggled to keep up with schoolwork. If progressed learners are not encouraged to show up in class, the aim of the policy is partly defeated. Some educators were of the opinion that the Progression Policy has increased learner absenteeism as most progressed learners who are expected to attend class and extra classes conducted to support them do not attend them.

4.1.2. Theme 2: The nature of the teaching and learning in classrooms

As inferred from the focus group and semi-structured interviews, the circumstances and school environment were not conducive for teaching and learning. Thus, the two main themes which emerged within this context were lack of resources and overcrowding.

4.1.2.1. Lack of resources

Teaching and learning were mainly constrained by the non-availability or limited learning and teaching materials (PA1, PA2, PB2, PBFG2, PBFG3, PBFG4, PBFG5, PCFG2, and PD2) such as textbooks and sufficient classrooms (Henard and Roseveare, 2012). During the course of the interview, PC3, PD1, and PDFG3 mentioned that the non-availability of books needed to augment teaching was exacerbated by the introduction of the revised curriculum not being accompanied by necessary teaching materials. Invariably, this impacted on teaching as this negatively impacted on learners' performance. In particular, PBFG1 commented that lack of water has often resulted in the closure of the school, which adversely impacts covering the curriculum.

As regards teaching and learning materials, PB1 and PD1 highlighted that their schools had a problem of inadequate science laboratories, which prohibited learners from gaining exposure to practicals. Adeyemi (2008) believes that a possible strategy to addressing poor performances amongst students is by re-evaluating the circumstances and conditions in which such classes take place. The following comments serve as confirmation of the views raised above: *"...we do not have sufficient classrooms;we have a shortage of furniture and textbooks..., we cannot afford to get more teachers"* (PA2, PB1, PC2, PD1, and PD2).

4.1.2.2. Overcrowding

It was evident from the results that classroom management had become a challenge in schools. Due to the number of learners in each classroom, it was near impossible to offer learners individualized attention. According to the Department of Basic Education (2003), the average learner-teacher ratio in secondary schools was assumed to be 1:35 but was found to be over 50 learners per class per educator. PA2 and PBFG4 mentioned that the rowdiness of each class made it impracticable for educators to provide quality teaching to learners. The end result is thus often manifested through poor performances amongst learners. PBFG1, PBFG2, PDFG3, and PDFG4 mentioned that overcrowded classrooms denied learners the privilege of receiving individualized attention from their educators and, at the same time, overcrowded classes are not easy to control as they are very disruptive (Marcus and Page, 2016). Excerpts: *"...In one class we have more than 50 learners. ...the worst part of it, there are progressed learners; those learners are really struggling and as a teacher, it is difficult for me to cater for those learners"* (PA1). *".....we have a ratio of 1:80 learners in one class. ... how can you teach so big numbers?"* (PC1).

PC2 explained that the increase in the number of students did not correspond with resource availability. Thus, the sizes of classes were highly detrimental to educators and learners as differentiated teaching was not practicable. The direct impact of this was the decline in the quality of teaching. In a number of cases, the unimpressive results were attributed to the increase in the number of progressed learners: *".....with the ratio of 1:45. Some of them end up bunking classes because they felt so embarrassed in front of potential learners"* (PAFG1).

Five participants agreed that progressed learners need counselling from educational psychologists, but it is not feasible due to resource constraints. Most of the participants insisted that progressed learners need additional resources to improve their schoolwork, even though there is an outcry in schools about the shortage of resources and educators.

4.1.3. Theme 3: Personal factors

A widely accepted view among the focus group participants as well as those who partook in the semi-structured interviews was that personal factors also impacted the quality of teaching and

learning amongst the chosen underperforming public secondary schools. This theme comprised two sub-themes, namely learner motivation and learner discipline.

4.1.3.1. Learner motivation

Seven participants of the semi-structured interviews and 36 participants of the focus group discussions reported that teaching and learning were greatly influenced by the learners' attitude towards school. A general consensus shared amongst participants was that most learners were unmotivated and do not see the value of learning. It was noted specifically by PBF2 that the Progression Policy makes learners very demotivated and that teaching demotivated learners is very stressful for the educator. PA1, PB2, PD4, and PDFG4 commented that learners' negative attitudes towards learning led to a high rate of absenteeism among learners, which created a lack of basic content knowledge in their learning: *"...since this Progression Policy was implemented, some progressed learners do not want to learn; they are so demotivated. They don't see the value of working hard to be promoted to the next grade"* (PA1, PC3, and PD4).

Motivation is an imperative influencer of learners' achievement, as stated by Schofield (1981). Learners who enjoy learning are likely to spend more time and energy mastering a subject. As a result, they are reinforced by the success they achieve, which, in turn, continues to motivate them to perform well during teaching and learning: *"These progressed learners have totally lost an interest in their schoolwork..."* (PDFG4 and PEF5).

The imperativeness of motivation amongst learners is expressed through Usher and Kober (2012) work, as a factor that could influence students' overall activities within the schooling environment. They also explain that motivation also influences the amount of effort and time learners dedicate to their studies; the manner they do their homework, how they relate with their educators and peers; the extent to which they would be willing to seek help when confronted with an academic-related issue, or other challenges they may confront within the four corners of the school.

4.1.3.2. Learner discipline

Amongst the participants, six allegedly claimed that the majority of learners were indisciplined. They believe the rights given to learners by the government far outweigh theirs. The educators also claim they feel unprotected, and there was barely any repercussion learners would face should they not do their assignments.

Some excerpts were recorded during the course of the interview: *"The other issue of discipline is that these learners have been given more rights, some of them are rude in class. They have more rights of which as a teacher you become helpless"* (PA1, PB2, and PC3). *".. the Constitution does not allow us to use corporal punishment;....no effective methods to discipline these children. They also need emotional support due to their lack of self-esteem, which leads them to be disruptive in classes"* (PDFG4).

Educators were of the opinion that progressed learners should be disciplined if they are not serious about their studies but that the DBE must develop disciplinary measures since corporal punishment is no longer allowed. The parents of progressed learners must also be enjoined to collaborate with the school on disciplinary measures carried out to encourage learners to take their schoolwork seriously. Excerpt: *"We call their parents but most of them won't attend. Even if we send some written warning against their children, still they won't attend. Truly speaking, due to the abolishment of corporal punishment, it is really difficult to discipline them"* (PAFG1).

The participants revealed that some of these learners were defiant in schools because they did not have the necessary content knowledge to cope in the FET Phase, and eventually get frustrated due to their inability to cope in class.

4.1.4. Theme 4: Policy-related matters

A consensus amongst participants was that some policies negatively affected teaching and learning. The major sub-themes in relation to this theme were curriculum coverage, learner

knowledge, learner assessment, school identity, and learner support. The following sections discuss each of the sub-themes.

4.1.4.1. Curriculum coverage

Curriculum coverage refers to what a learner is required to encounter, study, practise, and master. The investigative questions on curriculum coverage sought to establish whether teachers had content knowledge of their subjects.

PB2, PC2, PD2, and PE2 agreed that some of their teachers managed to complete the syllabus by conducting extra classes even though their challenge was that learner attendance was poor. PA2 indicated that in the previous year, the music teacher had some personal issues and did not want to take three months' leave in order for the school to appoint a temporary teacher. The teaching and learning were then compromised because the learners did not finish the syllabus. The principal had to get a teacher from a neighboring school to assist, but it was too late and the pass rate dropped to 32%.

Some participants noted the following: *"The school also introduced some intervention programs for the progressed learners such as holiday classes, morning and Saturday classes"* (PDFG4 and PEF5).

4.1.4.2. Learner knowledge

Eight teachers complained that some progressed learners did not meet the requirements during the Foundation Phase. They explained that this challenge may be traced to entry at the FET phase, as there was inadequate learning and teaching time. On the contrary, much time is allotted to assessment, wherein the learners been assessed do not necessarily possess sufficient knowledge. Additionally, it was pointed out that, learners' chances of passing Grade 12 is near impossible as they often do not grasp or comprehend the Grade 10 and 11 curricula (Mola, 2016). Excerpt: *"These learners have no Foundation Phase skills... especially in content subjects"* (PA1).

Ruben (2015) states that if learners have poor subject content knowledge from the Foundation Phase, performing well in the FET Phase is unlikely. Hence, it is quite obvious that the ill-preparedness of learners at lower grades will likely result in some difficulty when such students are studying at high school.

4.1.4.3. Learner assessment

The participants generally indicated that the manner in which learners were assessed in Grades 7, 8, and 9 would not guarantee much in terms of quality results. The supporting argument is that learners in lower phases do not write common tests as in Grades 10 to 12 (PA1, PA2, PB1, PC2, and PD2). Some Grade 9 learners passed with flying colors but still somehow struggled in class and wanted to change subjects in Grade 10. The invigilation in the Senior Phase is not controlled as in the FET Phase. PA1, PA2, PB1, PC1, and PD1 stated that all underperforming public secondary schools need a method to analyze each learner's performance at the Grade 8 to 9 level, as a means to ensuring that the marks awarded to such students were a vivid reflection of their educational abilities. Another reason for poor performance in the GET Phase is that the criteria for progression in this phase differ from the criteria in the FET Phase. In the GET Phase, once the learner failed once in a phase, that learner would be pushed to the next phase.

Below is an excerpt: *"Most progressed learners could not cope with their schoolwork; they are experiencing difficulties, they lack a foundation knowledge"* (PDFG4). Participants also noted that projects based on research and few other tasks necessarily did not equip learners for their exams.

4.1.4.4. School identity

The research also revealed that the Progression Policy not only affected the progressed learners and other learners who deserve their promotions, it also affected the reputation of the school in

general. A school with a high percentage of progressed learners will have results that show that the majority of students fail examinations. Since most progressed learners do not perform well in their examinations, it leads to criticism of the school's ability to produce successful learners, which affects the school's reputation.

PA2, PB2, and PC2 stated that the Progression Policy affected the schools' pass rate. Since the DoE introduced this policy in the FET Phase, schools' pass rates have fluctuated. The schools' enrolment has also decreased and the reputation of the schools was compromised due to the low performance, as noted below: "... before the implementation of this policy in FET Phase our pass rate was above 75% but now ranges from 20% to 29%. ...The reason is that some of them lack some basics from the Foundation Phase, such as how to read and write properly" (PA2, PB3, and PCFG1). The extracts from these participants imply that the Progression Policy contributes to school reputation through its impact on the general performance of learners in examinations.

4.1.4.5. Learner support

It has been noted that attention has been paid to struggling learners by the subject teachers. The Minister of Education, Motshekga (2015), suggests that progressed learners must be provided with supporting educational programs. A learner can only be progressed based on four guidelines, as directed by the DoE. Circular E22 of 2016 states four criteria for progression: the learner must repeat either Grade 10 or 11; must do all SBAs for all subjects; the learner must pass the Language of Learning and Teaching; the learner must equally pass four subjects, including Life Orientation (DBE, 2016b). The primary objective of this policy is to enable learners to progress to the next grade, instead of their continual repetition of the same grade due to poor academic performance.

Ten participants agreed that the DBE provided progressed learners with some support programs, such as Saturday classes and holiday and boot camps. Lead educators conduct morning and afternoon classes to support progressed learners, but the problem is that the progressed learners do not attend these classes.

In accordance with the narrative above, it can be said that these findings resonate with those of earlier studies (Roux, 2020; Botha *et al.* 2016; Klopper, 2021; Engelbrecht and Ankiewicz, 2016). However, to a much-heightened degree not common amongst other under-sourced schools in provinces such as Gauteng and the Western Cape.

5. Conclusion and recommendations

The study showed that schools have different approaches to which they manage factors influencing the performances of their learners; although, there are a number of commonalities. In conclusion, a student-centric approach may be used to curtail the undesirable or pitiable conditions of the sampled schools. The application of the Progression Policy by educators and principals who partook in this research did not adhere to the prescribed protocol by the DoE. Some of them did not follow all four progression criteria as prescribed by the DoE. The negative views held by the teachers were greatly informed by the dysfunctional school social context and environment. Most of the teachers were in favor of weak learners being retained, and not progressed so that they could become fully prepared for the next grade. Some teachers were in favor of progressing learners to the next grade if the DBE and parents provided the necessary support. Another negative implication was that the quality of educational standards amongst learners was found to be dwindling as they advanced to their next grade.

As a result, learners dropped out in the long term because they became weaker academically as they found it difficult to adapt to the new workload as they advanced to the next grade. Academically weak learners often lack confidence and are often trapped in an environment of low status and self-esteem. Some of the teachers are yet to fully comprehend the Progression Policy and therefore becomes an issue when it becomes necessary to implement the policy. The DoE stipulates that only four criteria should be considered prior to the progression of learners to the next grade. Thus, it becomes imperative for educators alongside their respective principles to

undergo a capacitation program in order to fully comprehend the grade promotion and progression, as well as how to effectually implement the policies in schools.

The researchers believe that this empirical research provides the involved as well as the non-involved schools; the districts, and the province with adequate understanding and knowledge that may augment the reconstruction and review of some of their strategies. It is preconceived that districts are best in a position to minimize the gaps attributed to the Progression Policy-related gaps. A limitation to this study, however, is the inability to involve more than five secondary schools within the Pinetown District or the KwaZulu-Natal Province. An assessment of all schools within the Pinetown district may have provided a more elaborate and robust insight. This was however unattainable due to resource constraints.

Should the policy be well implemented; whilst stakeholders are actively involved, the resultant effect will be manifested in learners' performance. More so, the curriculum management and implementation are bound to improve should the district officials get actively involved, particularly, subject advisors and circuit managers. A meaningful improvement will materialize should a proactive deployment of educational officials be involved, whilst required support is given and prioritized among the vulnerable and progressed learners. This indicates that an effectual implementation of strategies aimed at improving learners' performance requires a joint effort of stakeholders. Thus, the existing implementation-like gaps require a swift amendment in the manner the districts go about realising their intervention strategies.

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