

Challenges educators encounter with South Africa's grade progression policy: A social justice perspective

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In South Africa, progression refers to the elevation of a learner from one grade to the following grade (excluding grade R), in spite of the learner not having achieved all the promotion stipulations (DBE, 2012a). This article is embedded in a social justice theoretical framework that advocates for a just society through fairness, equal access to opportunities and social privileges within a society. It aims at advocating for both teachers and learners' rights, against the progression policy that seems to marginalise them. Our study employed a qualitative approach in order to gain insight into the challenges teachers face and the effects of the progression policy on learners. A purposive and convenience sample of 16 teachers and 8 departmental heads was interviewed and put in a focus group discussion to determine their perceptions on the implementation of the progression policy. We used a content analysis method that explored covert and explicit meanings of underlying explanations from research participants. Results indicate that teachers face many challenges in implementing the progression policy, which negate the intention of the policy and the quality of education. Our article recommends that teachers be given the necessary support they require to successfully implement the policy.

Introduction

In the recent years, a learner would repeat a grade until all the grade requirements are met in order to be promoted to the following grade, despite the number of times a learner has been in that particular grade. In reaction to high retention and dropout rates in South African primary schools, the Department of Education implemented a social progression policy in a bid to realise every learner's right to basic education. Social progression or automatic progression is the practice or policy of promoting learners from one grade to the next, irrespective of their academic performance, while grade retention is holding back underperforming learners in the same grade until they acquire the minimum grade-appropriate skills (King, Orazem & Paterno, 2015). The social or automatic progressing of learners is done in an attempt to reduce dropout rates that seemed to escalate as a result of fatigue brought by regular grade retention.

The Admission Policy for Ordinary Public Schools and the National Protocol for Assessment (NPA) make up the progression policy and indicate that learners must advance with their age cohort – the rule for reinstatement and retention is a single year in a single phase (DBE, 2012a; 2012b). This means that learners must be progressed by their age cohort and must be retained once, in a single phase. The National Policy Pertaining to the Progression and Promotion, must be read together with the NPA, because they both provide guidance on how learners must be promoted, retained and progressed in schools. They also give guidance on activities and procedures for the assessment of learner

achievement. Collectively, these policies are referred to as the progression policy (DBE, 2012a; 2012b).

According to the progression policy, learners must proceed to the next phase even if they have information gaps or comprehension deficits in certain learning areas. The problem with this, however, is that these shortcomings could become evident as learners advance in their studies, because content in grades and in subjects is interrelated and acts as a continuum to the next grade, where learners are confronted by more difficult content. Difficulties experienced by learners in primary schools often carry over to secondary and tertiary education. Chan and Sidhu (2015, p.606) reported that stumbling blocks for learners include cognitive challenges, failure to become active learners, instructional problems and struggles relating to time management. Stakeholders associate insufficient readiness with lack of success in tertiary studies and training and with sub-standard primary education, even before hurdles in secondary schools become evident (Maddock & Maroun, 2018, p.204). This is problematic in later years because learners failed to grasp the necessary content and information.

Teachers too are challenged by the implementation of this policy. Teachers are expected to provide support structures for new and progressed learners, which could be a daunting task. Munje and Maarman (2016, p.189) believed that it is discouraging for teachers to be confronted with learners who are not ready for their new grade. Learners may seem unprepared because they are not up to date with the essential and required content of the grade they have been progressed to (Kika & Koetze, 2019, p.4). This causes pressure for learners, and the progression pattern is often continuous and, eventually, causes learners to exit the primary school phases without sufficient mastery of content knowledge.

While the above studies have made contributions to the study on how teachers perceive the progression policy, there is still minimal research in South Africa on the challenges teachers face in the implementation of the progression policy, and the effects that the policy has on learners. Therefore, with this article, the researchers intend to contribute to research in South Africa, particularly Motheo district, by exploring the challenges teachers face in the implementation of the progression policy and its potential effects on student learning. The paper is arranged as follows: literature review and theoretical framework, methodology, findings and conclusion of our study.

Literature review and theoretical framework

Munje and Maarman (2016, p.195) stated that the progression policy in schools is characterised by a series of confrontations and inferences in relation to learner performance, due to its lack of a sharply outlined formation and implementation strategy. Emphasising this point, Adonis (2021, p.12) explained that the implementation of the progression policy has developed into major challenges for parents and learners alike; teachers also perceive progression as a challenge. Stott, Dreyer and Venter (2015, p.98) reported that progressed learners are often demotivated, inadequate, stubborn and incompetent, they skip classes and extra classes, do not do their homework and are slow,

and they are a burden to teachers. What the research article reports is evident in schools, where learners misbehave, fail to do their work, and have no care at all for their schoolwork because they know about the policy and that they will pass regardless (Makhanya, 2021, p.3). The policy discourages learners from recognising the value of education, and to put the necessary effort in their studies.

Tani (2018, p.72) claimed that one of the challenges is that teachers are not supported enough by their school management and education department inspectorate, whilst principals claim they do not get sufficient time to keep track of and support teachers as required, because of excessive teaching load and other administrative duties. Teachers' morale is affected when they have to teach learners who are not actually ready to be in the class, as their numeracy and literacy levels are not what they are expected to be (Adonis, 2021, p.6). Teachers become discouraged when they are exposed to unprepared learners in their classrooms, and automatically advancing learners poses challenges for teachers. Aphane (2022, p.53) mentioned that the school principal should ensure that teachers are at work, and curriculum needs are adequately addressed to attain learner success.

In schools, learners are developed to enter the labour market and be competent in what they are assigned to do. One of the harmful effects of the progression policy is that it creates low-skill-level learners who cannot be competent in the labour market and will do little to curb the unemployment rate in the country (Makhanya, 2021, p.36). This is a result of their low levels of skills, literacy and numeracy because they have not gained the necessary knowledge, skills and content in the appropriate grades, they have been progressed through the grades in accordance with the progression policy. Low literacy skills in turn affect a learners' self-esteem that has been degraded by the progression policy. Low self-esteem inevitably causes learners to experience fear and anxiety, become unmotivated, have low resilience, poor social relationships and a weak sense of themselves. Mawhinney, Irby and Roberts (2016, p.156) reported that some learners lose their confidence and motivation as a result of their inability to keep pace with material taught in their current grade. This is because they are intimidated by other learners who seem to have mastery of the content. All these negatively affect the standard and level of education being provided in South Africa.

As much as the social progression policy aims to combat high dropout rates, this goal is not necessarily achieved. Some progressed learners ultimately drop out of school owing to the frustration of having failed a grade and being progressed (Khobe 2021, p.3). Brahmhatt (2020, p.14) elaborated that a large number of learners in South Africa cannot read, write and understand at the level that is appropriate for their current grade and age. This then affects their matriculation results. Spaul (2013) stated that:

... of the 100 pupils that start grade one, 50 will drop-out before Grade 12 (most of which happens in grade 10 and 11), 40 will pass the NSC exam and 12 will qualify for university. Given that the NSC is the only externally evaluated, nationally standardised exam in the South African school system, grade progression in primary and lower-secondary school is an unreliable indicator of actual learning. Many pupils proceed to higher grades without acquiring foundational skills in numeracy and literacy. As the NSC

exam approaches, schools and teachers can no longer afford to promote pupils who have not acquired the grade appropriate skills, and consequently pupils fail and drop-out of schools in large numbers in Grade 10 and 11 as schools weed out the weaker pupils. (Spaull, 2013, p. 5)

Brahmbaht (2020, p.15) found these statistics alarming, because this has implications for the job market, employment rates and wages, which will influence the country's gross domestic product (GDP).

Social justice theory

Social justice theory was developed by John Rawls in 1971. The theory is grounded on principles that encourage fairness, participation, equality and the realisation of people's human rights. All these principles advance social cooperation. Social cooperation actualises a better life for all, and better than any would have if each were to live mainly by their own efforts (Rawls, 1971, p.4). Spitz (2011, p. 58) made it clear that Rawls developed this theory with the aim of preserving people's integrity, through freedom, thought and expression – also freedom of conscience and all political and civil rights that form the core of democracy. People must, therefore, be at liberty to express their thoughts, with the aim of achieving social cooperation.

In the view of this theory, people's behaviour and performance is influenced by the way they are treated and how they perceive things directed at them in a work environment. When people are treated rightfully and fairly, they maximise production and people work together towards the same goal. In relation to education, social justice concerns a fair distribution of resources and just, equitable treatment of students and teachers at teaching and learning institutions as a social environment. In our study, the use of social justice theory provides ground for balanced discussion on the discrepancies generated by the promotion policy, its unjust and unfair application, as well as its unenviable outcomes for both teachers and learners. Policies, however, are handed down from the government ('top-down') and the needs of the teacher are not considered to ensure that effective teaching and learning take place (Adonis, 2021, p.3). Policy decisions are done to educators, not with them. This approach disadvantages both educators and learners, because they are closest to the classroom, and they feel the impact of the policy more than anyone else. Teachers face a myriad of challenges related to teaching and accommodating progressed learners in classrooms, yet they are not provided with training to deal with such challenges, nor are they provided with a curriculum that is suitable for progressed learners. This is an unfair practice for both learners and teachers, and it has a lasting impact on teaching and learning.

Teachers are the people who shape and guide teaching and learning in the classroom, and they need to be accorded power and privilege to delve into the progression policy and its processes. Teachers must be awarded the opportunity to indicate how the progression policy affects the quality of learning and teaching through the challenges they encounter. Social justice means that participation, fairness and equality as it relates to teachers and learners in the education system are important. The progression policy comes into conflict

with individual liberties, and it marginalises teachers and learners alike. The policy creates conditions where teachers and learners must obey the law without voicing their opinions, and stakeholders are further divided into those who obey and those who dispute the progression policy. Beere (2017) indicated that progressed learners' social development and self-esteem are affected because they are stigmatised, provoked and labelled throughout their school years.

This theory was considered relevant for our study because it offered a premise that assisted in recognising equity and fairness of treatment in order to achieve social cooperation amongst teachers and other stakeholders of schools and the entire education system. Social cooperation can be attained when all stakeholders of a school act as agents of social justice. Schools, as social places, are obliged to administer fairness, justice and equity. When all teachers, as stakeholders, are treated fairly and given recognition in policies that affect them and learners, their performance levels may increase and reluctance to cooperate may be inhibited. The policy frameworks indicate that teachers require certain levels and kinds of support to give effect to their role (Jancic Mogliacci, Raanhuis & Howell, 2016, p.14). Support in this context would promote equity, freedom and fairness. When teachers are unable to negotiate their emotions, and the demands and expectations of others, they might become demoralised, and experience burn-out (Martin, 2015). Failure by teachers and learners is caused by teachers being confronted by injustice and inequity. This therefore negates the progression policy and yields negative results. Therefore, our research considers the lived realities and social experiences of the situation in which our study was conducted.

Method

This study was based on an interpretive paradigm, which permits people to view and understand reality in different and multiple ways that reflect individuals' everyday lives. An interpretive paradigm recognises multiple realities that are created by the actors themselves (Bartlett & Burton, 2020, p.69). It was through this paradigm the researchers were able to view teacher's multiple opinions regarding the progression policy, what challenges them, and how it affects learners. A qualitative methodology was used to direct the study towards gathering data that would give in-depth insight into the phenomenon under study. Our qualitative approach concentrated on descriptive data rather than numerical data. A phenomenological research design was coupled with qualitative approach to assist us by guiding towards appropriate actions and methods that will enable a responding to the research question in the most logical manner. Phenomenological research design is a type of research that focuses on the meaning that certain lived experiences denote for participants, what the experiences mean for them and is able to provide a comprehensive description of the experiences (Nieuwenhuis, 2019, p.85). The choice of this design was informed by the nature of the problem to be explored; it permitted the researchers to understand the everyday experiences of the participants while suspending their own preconceived assumptions about the phenomenon. For the purpose of the study, phenomenological research design was employed, because it allowed us to collect data and knowledge from the participants' personal experiences about the progression policy.

Participants and setting

Data were collected at four public schools in Ladybrand, Manyatseng Township, Circuit 11, Motheo district. The schools were purposively and conveniently selected because of their geographic location, learner enrolment and status (public schools). The schools are located in close proximity to the researchers' workplace, with one of the schools being the researcher's workplace. This location reduced traveling costs and time restraints, as it was easy to travel to the participants. The fact that all these schools are public entities, means they operate on a similar scale and follow identical prescribed DBE policies. The advantage here was that they are all public schools, which meant that they had a significantly higher enrolment than private schools. This widened the sample because the greater the number of learners, the greater the number of teachers and departmental heads.

In selecting and grouping the study's sample, we deliberately collected data from four teachers at each school. From these four teachers, two teachers represented the foundation phase, and two the intermediate and senior phase ('inter-sen' phase) at each school, bringing the total number of teachers to 16 for all the schools. Two departmental heads at each school were also selected, one from the foundation phase and another from the intermediate and senior phase. The total number of departmental heads was eight from the four schools, bringing the total number of participants to 24. Departmental heads are teachers too, who have been mandated to empower, train and monitor other teachers into productivity. They too have their own teaching allocation at schools.

Data collection

Semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions were used to collect data for the study because these are flexible formats that motivate participants to provide comments, stories and alliances, as well as to propose new topics. While collecting data, the researchers considered ethical issues that guided the research methodology. We had to interpret what the participants said, thereby building greater understanding, which is a common goal of interpretivist researchers. In this type of interview, the researcher is not obliged to stick to a particular sequence of questions or to structure the questions in a particular way, instead, there is a general plan for the theme to be discussed (Packer, 2018, p.56). The researcher decides on the overarching questions to be asked and there is no particular order to be followed when asking the questions. The questions ought to be open-ended, in order to allow the researcher to dissect answers to obtain more clarity. Participants were at liberty to respond to the questions in either English or their home language, which was Sesotho for all of them. The researcher translated the Sesotho responses into English, without misinterpreting the participants and presented extracts from the responses verbatim (Hlasa, 2022, p.54-55). The types of questions asked are provided by (Hlasa, 2022, p.121-125). The participants each gave the researcher time suitable to their individual schedules, that would not disrupt teaching and learning at the schools. Data were collected from June to September 2021.

After the interviews were conducted, all the participants were put together in a focus group discussion. Doing this created more platforms for continued discussions and elaborations. Teachers and departmental heads were combined in a group to discuss totally new questions, different from the ones that were asked during individual interviews. This assisted in getting additional information that may have been forgotten during individual interviews; also, new thinking amongst participants was triggered, leading to lengthy, insightful discussions.

Flick (2018, p.2) articulated that motivating group intercommunications enthusiastically relates to concerns about facilitating the focus group discussion and ensuring that participants converse among themselves rather than collaborating solely with the researcher. The researcher, however, prepared questions that encouraged interaction and varied responses, in order to stimulate discussion and enable further probing. Interviewing multiple candidates at the same time assisted the researcher to see whether the teachers and departmental heads worked together in implementing the progression policy. The researcher was also able to explore shared experiences and identities of teachers and departmental heads.

Ethical considerations

Before commencing any form of research, a researcher needs to observe ethical considerations inclusive of permission to conduct research, consent, confidentiality and harm. The researcher, firstly, requested permission and ethical clearance to conduct the study from the research ethics committee at the University of the Free-State. The researcher sought authorisation to conduct the research from the Department of Education, district circuit office and principals of the four schools that were selected. The participants were the primary source of information, and, because of them, the study became attainable. The researcher, therefore, had to consider their thoughts and aim for the highest level of confidentiality and respect. To engage the participants in the study, they first had to understand what the research entailed, its nature and all the necessary procedures and methods to be followed. The researcher also made it clear to them that if any of them as participants wished to withdraw, for whatever reasons, they were entitled to do so. The participants completed a consent form as agreement to participate in the study. Consent to record the interviews was sought and the identities of the participants were kept confidential, as were the names of the schools. The researcher also pledged to the participants that their responses would not be provided to any unauthorised users or people who have power over them. Their opinions were highly regarded in this study. Also, any form of harm was avoided in the study, physically, psychologically, emotionally and otherwise, even when participants' opinions differed during arguments and discussions.

Data analysis

In this study, content analysis was considered viable for data analysis. It was convenient for checking similarities and variations in information provided by participants. Content analysis has been described by Bernard, Wutich and Ryan (2016, p.243) as combined

techniques for methodologically encoding and analysing qualitative data. After collecting data, the researcher listened to the recorded responses in order to familiarise themselves with the data before it was transcribed. After listening to the audio recordings, the researcher sorted and transcribed the data simultaneously. The researcher read the transcriptions thoroughly and frequently to gain a deeper meaning of the data and its relationships and identified patterns and formed subthemes. As the researcher developed initial ideas and feelings gathered from the data; notes were jotted down. This process, according to Kenneavy, Harnois, Atkinson and Korgen (2022, p.304), is referred to as memoing. They explained that memoing is the practice of writing reflective notes or a memo about what the researcher is learning from the data. Memoing assists in tracking the development of ideas through the analysis process and tracks the progress of code and theme development (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p.233). The researcher looked for similar responses and patterns from all participants, who had responded to the same question, and colour coded these consistencies. The similar responses were grouped together to form subthemes. The researcher eventually exported the information on particular themes and subthemes into separate Word documents. This was done to make data more controllable, by reducing the volume of raw data to major and dominant patterns, to create a meaningful and comprehensible structure that could be analysed to respond to the research questions.

Findings and discussion

Ethical considerations required the researcher to protect the identities of the participants and keep the information confidential. Codes were assigned: schools, A to D; teachers, A T1 to 4 (School A, Teacher 1-4); departmental heads A-D DH2 (School A, B, C, D, Departmental head 2). The research findings are presented and discussed under the following themes: deteriorating education standard; poor literacy skills; parental involvement; behavioural problems; delaying curriculum coverage and excessive workloads; and loss of interest and motivation.

Deteriorating education standard

Whether or not learners drop out of the education system, the quality of education and learner level outcomes are declining significantly. More learners are kept in the system, while Grade 12 results deteriorate (Mogale & Modipane, 2021, p.1). This decline could be the result of the policy being implemented ineffectively, or that its implementation should be monitored more effectively. Matoti (2010) reported that concerns about the deteriorating standard of education include questions about unprepared learners ensuing from internal promotion operations, and the eagerness of schools to obtain elevated success rates.

The progression policy directs that progressed learners must be supported to adjust to the demands of the grade they are in, so as to break the cycle of progression. In the case of strategies to support learners, the policy states that it is mandatory for schools and districts to outline vividly coherent mediation plans that are inclusive of a timely identification of low performers or learners who are at risk so that the district, province

and school can devise alternative learning opportunities (Kika & Kotze, 2019, p.4). DBE (2012a) indicated that learners with barriers or learning challenges may need testing patterns and procedures that offer them uniform opportunities to reveal their understanding of content that is at the same grade level as the general assessment. It is mandatory for teachers to devise support strategies in the classroom to aid learners who have been progressed, to align their academic level with that of their peers, so that they do not gravitate into an on-going cycle of progression without meeting the necessary promotion requirements (Brahmbhatt, 2020, p.3).

During the analysis, it was discovered that teachers believe the progression policy contributes to the decline in education quality. They reported that the policy produces incompetent learners for workplaces and challenges prospective tertiary students. This is in line with Makhanya (2021, p.36), that one of the harmful effects of the progression policy is that it creates low skill-level learners who cannot be competent in the labour market and will do little to curb the unemployment rate in the country. Also, teachers do not comply with the prescripts of the policy; that progressed learners be given the support they need to cope in the grade they are in. They apply the 'one-size-fits-all' approach to teaching, regardless of whether the learner has been retained, promoted or progressed.

The sad thing about this policy is that learners get to matric without even knowing how to construct a simple sentence. How is such a learner expected to get a proper job in the future? (AT2).

The progression policy degrades the quality of education and the type of society we will live with in the future. It influences progressed learners' way of thinking, that things can be achieved without hard work (BT3).

Related to this finding, Makhanya (2021, p.66) postulated that progressing learners may leave them unprepared for the future in terms of future senior grades, as well matriculation and the NSC, where the progression policy does not apply. This means that the progression policy does not only affect learners at schools, it affects them post schooling. Social injustice is multifaceted in this instance, teachers too have been unjust to the learners, while they too have been marginalised by the policy. The teachers in this study expressed serious concerns about learners who were consistently being progressed even though they possessed information gaps – this too, teachers perceived as an unfair act to the learners, because learners face unpleasant effects as a result of being progressed in accordance with the progression policy. From the findings, it was discovered that teachers too have been unfair to the learners by not offering progressed learners the support they need to cope in the preceding grades.

Poor literacy skills

This subtheme relates to the ability of a learner to read and write eloquently at the required grade level. A learner has to be in a position to communicate and read clearly. Reading and writing skills are required, so that learners are skilled in a certain content area, either through communication or in writing (Lapp, Flood & Farnan, 2015, p.1).

Progressed learners seem to be struggling in these aspects. They are often not given an opportunity to fully develop their literacy even when need arises, because the mandatory progression policy needs to be followed when a learner has repeated a grade or is not in an appropriate age cohort. Literacy skills are considered to be low when an individual is not able to read, write, speak or function at a necessary grade level. Low skills hinder teaching and learning, because these are basic skills one needs to learn and to function effectively as an individual.

The findings indicate that teachers are confronted by illiterate learners, and some learners cannot communicate effectively and clearly because they lack reading and writing skills. Also, learners are unable to seek information in a written text and make meaning out of it. Learners ultimately become frustrated when they do not do well in standardised tests, which lead to truancy, dropping out and other negative reactions. Teachers' morale is affected when they have to teach learners who are not actually ready to be in the class, as their numeracy and literacy levels are not what they are expected to be (Adonis, 2021, p.6). It was highlighted that teachers also do not use the time allocated in timetables for reading effectively. This then disadvantages learners on reading fluently and for understanding because there is less practice and their spelling is terrible. Teachers do not regularly expose learners to literacy activities such as reading big books, story books and phonics writing in order to enable them to construct words and sentences

In School B, BDH2 disagreed;

Teachers do not use the time allocated on timetables for reading effectively. There is a slot on the time-table that indicates when it is time for DAR ('Drop All and Read'), this time is deliberately included to drill learners in reading and writing when there is a chance (BDH2).

In a focus group discussion at School C, most responses revealed that participants also faced challenges related to illiterate progressed learners, which does not only impact these learners' academic lives, but also their social and future economic lives. There are a lot of challenges with progressed learners, especially when it comes to writing; they do not space letters and words correctly, they write phonetically and ignore spelling rules, they make spelling errors due to difficulties with letter – sound relations. Their writing skills are poor.

The above perspectives concur with the literature, which reports that, even if the learner is fortunate and completes Grade 12, their minimal level of literacy and low career maturity will remain a challenge, since this maturity is required for informed and concise career decisions for their futures (Grossen et al. 2017, p.8). Brahmabhatt (2020, p.14) elaborated that the majority of South African learners cannot read, write and comprehend at the level that is appropriate for their grade and age. Reading and writing are the most common forms of communication and need to be perfected.

Parental involvement

The *South African Schools Act 84 of 1996*, section 3 (1) dispenses provision for parental involvement (Republic of South Africa, 1996). It states that parents have an obligation to

bring their children to school from the first school day of an academic year when such a learner reaches age seven, until the last school day of the year when such a learner reaches age 15 or Grade 9. This means that education is mandatory from ages seven to 15, Grade 1 to 9 and, until then, a parent must be fully involved in their children's education – socially, economically and otherwise. Parents fail to support learners, especially those of progressed learners. This makes teachers' work more difficult. It has been stated in the literature review that progressed learners are ill-disciplined. It becomes worse when parents are less interested. This coincides with Moagi (2020, p.202) that parents who do not participate in their children's schooling are often oblivious of the challenges confronting their children, and learners from such contexts are susceptible to failure because of issues such as absenteeism and class boycotts.

Parental involvement is necessary for accomplishing and expediting quality teaching and learning, therefore, teachers, parents and the school management team need to work collaboratively to make education a success, especially parents of progressed learners because they struggle mostly. There needs to be a tripartite collaboration if quality and effective teaching and learning is to be achieved. Research indicates that there is a continuous decline in parental involvement in schools (Sesinyi, 2020, p.1). If the decline prevails, it becomes inevitable that education quality declines. In the case of progressed learners, it is worse when parents are less involved or not involved at all, because these learners are already experiencing challenges that hinder them from excelling at school.

Teachers and departmental heads specified that they normally engaged with parents, when necessary, they informed them through writing letters, sending messages through teacher–parent *Whatsapp* groups, and held discussions in face-to-face term meetings and at teacher–parent evenings. Some parents show an interest in their children's schooling, while some do not. It was indicated by teachers that some parents felt that their education background was insufficient to assist their children with school activities such as homework.

Departmental heads shared similar opinions and confirmed that teachers try to engage parents, but there is reluctance on the side of parents to become involved. There could be multiple reasons for this reluctance, but it is the responsibility of a parent to give timely information to a teacher if there is hindrance regarding engagement.

These barriers shared by departmental heads and teachers' opinions correlate with the literature, that general academic performance, classroom practices, anticipated learner behaviour and school attendance are compromised as a result of deteriorating parental involvement. Moagi (2020, p.202) reported that parents who do not participate in their children's academic progress are often oblivious to challenges confronting their children and are unaware that their children are susceptible to failure because of issues like absenteeism and boycotting classes. Parental involvement positively affects the academic achievement of children, as well as facilitating better grades, higher test scores, regular school attendance, better social skills, improved behaviour and positive attitude towards school (Jeynes, 2003, p.202). Parents, as stakeholders, were unfair to teachers and learners. It seemed that parents' participation and interest in learners' education had declined

significantly. It had become difficult for teachers, on their own, to support learners, while parents, as stakeholders, did not play their part in providing their children with the necessary support. Participation is in indication of a socially just society, and in this case, parents failed to uphold it.

Behavioural problems

Khobe (2021, p.3) pronounced that the majority of progressed learners encounter academic hurdles and behavioural issues. This could be the result of them having given up on learning, and thereby diverting attention from their shortcomings, wanting control and power, and wanting the attention that successful learners receive.

This subtheme summarises various views of participants pertaining to the concept of the behaviour and discipline of progressed learners. In addressing the matter, a great number of teachers criticised the behaviour of progressed learners and indicated that they were problematic, they disturbed class stability by physically or verbally assaulting other learners, they talked when they should be quiet, they argued with the teacher unnecessarily, ignored instructions and disengaged from tasks given in the classroom. Khobe (2021, p.3) indicated that, despite the fact that the student progression policy aims to offer progressed learners a helping hand in terms of departing the education system with a qualification, it has become apparent that many progressed learners still experience academic barriers and behavioural issues. The barriers hinder and decrease education attainment of both progressed and promoted learners. Makhanya (2021, p.36) claimed that misbehaviour is a limitation upon learning, and teaching and learning is interrupted for the entire class when most of the teaching and learning time is directed to disciplining disruptive learners.

Teachers also indicated that parents have the misguided perception that they (teachers) are the only ones expected to discipline the learners. Parents feel that, because they are not part of the classroom and school activities, teachers have the sole responsibility of disciplining learners. Parents of the progressed learners are aware of the policy recommendations that a learner is allowed to repeat a grade once in a single phase, after that, promotion because an automatic affair. This fuels their demotivation to assist their children and care less about academic related issues. Teachers report that parents are unaware that discipline at home is equally important.

Participants reported that progressed learners' behaviour is appalling. Such conduct, if not controlled, may encourage a wider group of learners to behave in disruptive ways. If teachers avoid reprimanding or engaging with learners, misbehaving learners may escalate their disruptive behaviour to obtain teacher and peer attention. Makhanya (2021, p.36) reported that misbehaviour limits learning and teaching, and learning is interrupted for the entire class, when most of the time is directed into disciplining these learners. A teacher must have a strict or strong approach to discipline.

Delaying curriculum coverage, and excessive workload

In teaching and learning, a teacher ought to maintain an effective pace, and progress at the required speed. The DBE regulates teachers' pace through employment of pacesetters and the annual teaching plan (ATP), that was used as trimmed curriculum guide that was followed during the Covid-19 pandemic. These documents are helpful because, if used effectively, the teacher does not waste time unnecessarily on one topic or move too fast through another. Pacesetters assist in striking a balance between topics taught in the grade. Classrooms have learners of differing comprehension levels and bringing them to the same understanding may not be an easy balance to achieve, so the pacesetter provides a uniform strategy for teaching all the learners. Keeping pace cannot necessarily be effective because progressed learners learn at a slower pace compared to the smarter learners.

Teachers in this study mentioned that having progressed learners in their classes causes unnecessary delay of curriculum coverage and increases their workload. Also, they indicated that progressed learners suffer as a result of the pacesetter, because teachers sometimes have to move on to a new topic and leave behind progressed learners who have not grasped the content. The participants agreed that, in the case of progressed learners, the policy resonates with quantity without quality. Also, teachers' workload is increased, because they have to create remediation time to assist these learners. It was indicated by Makhanya (2021, p.29) that policies in South Africa, including the progression policy, have been adopted from Western countries, which seem to be performing well academically because they have strong remediation in place, thus, resulting in outstanding performance in comparative tests. It could also be advantageous for South African teachers to adopt this technique, in order to achieve optimal academic results.

At School B, BT1 and BT2 held the view that they wasted a lot of time trying to bring progressed learners up to speed. These learners miss tests and lessons, and this requires teachers to go back to the missed lessons when the learners return to school. Doing so wastes teachers' time and causes delay regarding curriculum coverage for other learners.

Loss of interest and motivation

Motivation enhances learners' performance; in that it activates and encourages positive behaviour towards achieving their goals. When learners are adequately motivated, they, in turn, motivate the teacher and make teaching and learning fun, timely and productive. When they are less interested and demotivated, they attain low-level outcomes. The policy does not only demotivate progressed learners, but the promoted learners also become discouraged to work better because they know they will still be in the next grade with other less performing learners. Kumanda, Afungmeyu and Mafumo (2017) postulated that the policy affects learners' aspirations and self-esteem and pushes teachers to deal with underprepared learners while simultaneously trying to teach adequately prepared learners.

In agreement with Stott et al. (2015, p.93), teachers reported that one of the issues regarding the progression policy is that it demotivates learners from striving for better performance, due to the lack of the intimidation of grade retention. Teachers elucidated that learners have become conscious of the existence of this policy, therefore, their academic efforts are declining. Parents are also aware of the policy, and their support to their children is deteriorating. Teachers are not an exception in this matter; they too have reduced their support with regard to teaching, because they perceive that the learners will automatically make it to the next grade. This loss of motivation and interest becomes threatening to the learners' education. Sayed, Kanjee and Nkomo (2013), quoted by Adonis (2021, p.93), concurred that effective learner education attainment will only be completely accomplished in a tripartite collaboration amongst teachers, learners and parents.

This supports the literature (Chataa & Nkengbeza, 2020, p.1738; Khobe & Mukuna, 2023, p.1244), that the progression policy demotivates learners in that they do not feel the need to display a competitive spirit. Makhanya (2021, p.3) states that the policy demotivates learners from learning at all, as any student can now progress without academically deserving the promotion. This means that the policy demotivates promoted learners to work hard, because they feel the progressed learners enjoy equal benefits as they do, without investing in hard work and commitment to their studies. This reflects the researchers back to the suitability of the social justice theoretical framework. Both the promoted and progressed learners suffer as a result of the progression policy.

Implications of the study

From the above narratives, it is evident that teachers consider the progression policy to be demotivating for learners, parents and teachers. What, then, happens when no one is interested and motivated? All of them need support from each other to function effectively. There needs to be a tripartite collaboration if quality and effective teaching and learning is to be achieved. This idea reflects the researchers back to the need for proper support for teachers, so that they are better equipped to teach and handle these learners, because parents and learners are fully dependent on teachers. The narratives coincide with the theoretical framework that indeed social justice needs to be achieved in schools as social institutions.

Recommendations for future research

Schlebusch and Schlebusch (2024, p.129) specified that the aim of the progression policy is to address poor learner performance in education, to improve the education system, and to provide adequate access to education for underperforming learners. As such, it is crucial that schools and teachers collaborate to improve progressed learners' academic performance. The type of support progressed learners receive has the potential to determine their success or failure (Mogale & Malatji, 2023, p.92). Teachers need to follow the correct procedures in assisting progressed learners. They need to consult learners' previous grade teacher, to check for inhibitors or a learners' strong points. This will also assist to identify the root cause of poor performance, whether they are social, socio-

economic or psychological factors. School principals need to ascertain that the school's School Based Support Team is fully functional to support progressed learners, and that progressed learners be referred to special schools should it be necessary. Also, principals need to ascertain that departmental heads monitor teachers' strategies in teaching and assessing progressed learners, and that teachers facilitate learners' coping processes.

It is essential for the DBE to make amendments to the policies. In doing so, feedback must be elicited from teachers through unions on how the policies can be implemented best. The progression policy must be amended as per the teacher's grievances. The policies must prescribe direct teaching and assessment strategies, to be used for all kinds of learners' barriers and their intervention strategies. While at it, the DBE ought to collaborate effectively with schools through their School Based Support Team committees to ensure maximum support to progressed learners. Training for teachers is vital, so they can have insight and guidance on the implementation of the policy.

The DBE must consider showcasing various approaches teachers use, through the media or otherwise, where teachers can share successful strategies, they use individually in their classrooms to cater for progressed learners, and to ease the challenges they encounter.

Parents as stakeholders need to be cautioned about their relevance and roles in supporting learners in their schooling. They can be informed through seminars or awareness programs on their importance in the teaching and learning process.

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