



## EXAMINING PRINCIPALS' OBSERVATIONS ON LEARNERS' PROGRESSION IN SOUTH AFRICAN SECONDARY SCHOOLS

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### Abstract

*The purpose of the article was to examine principals' observations on learner progressions in South African secondary schools. In attempting to understand this learning phenomenon, this article endeavors to understand principals' observations on learner progressions in secondary schools. The research that underpinned this article adopted a qualitative approach, thereby employing semi-structured interviews as a means of data collection with secondary school principals in the rural areas of Limpopo and the North-West Provinces. The research undertaken adopted an interpretive paradigm in analysing the collected data. A proficient transcriber transcribed the audio-recorded interviews verbatim, and the researcher was provided with notes for interpreting the data. In relation to progressed learners, the interviewed secondary schools' principals regard learner progression as a challenge to schools because it affects the school results throughout the year. Even though some progressed learners seem to be eager to work hard and improve their results, most of them have already lost hope in the pursuit of their academic career. School principals' efforts to adjust to this policy do not yield positive results, and most of them wish that this progression policy should either be revised or be done away with. Principals have realized that some teachers are also demoralized by this fruitless departmental intervention, and their teaching progress is delayed by the progressed learners. Principals felt that they are trapped into this ever-challenging situation in such a way that they wish they could have been in a position of doing away with the progression policy.*

**Keywords:** *Schools, Policy, Progression, Principals, Progressed Learners.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

“If I had a way, I would do away with it”.

(A voice of one of the principal participants)

The purpose of this article is based on a study that set out to examine principals' observations on learner progression in South African secondary schools. Progression of learners is a contentious learning matter in schools. To understand this educational issue, this article endeavours to understand principals' observations on learner progressions in secondary schools. The dropout rates are quite high in South African schools and are estimated between 37% and 42% on a yearly basis.

The Department of Basic Education (DBE) developed what is known as the “progression policy” to solve the problem of the high dropout rate in secondary schools (Muedi et al., 2021). The DBE introduced progression in schools to support older learners and to reduce overcrowding and learner dropout in schools. Progressed learners are learners who fail to meet the requirements but are allowed to proceed to a next grade based on criteria adopted by the Department of Basic Education and the teacher formations (DBE, 2017).

The research on which this article is based is qualitative in nature, and semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect data. Data was analysed through an interpretative paradigm. A transcriber meticulously transcribed the audio-recorded interviews, providing the author with

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comments for interpretation. Themes were developed throughout the analysis. Implementing policies in the educational system is a difficult area of development on a global scale. Before 2013, learner progression applied only to the Foundation, Intermediate and Senior Phases of schooling. It was designed for learners who have been held back for longer than four years in a phase (Mogale & Modipane, 2021).

The learner progression policy was introduced in 2008 by the DBE for learners in the further education and training (FET) phase (i.e., Grades 10 and 11). At all levels, however, it has become a concern in schools. According to the progression policy, a learner may not repeat twice in a phase. In order to bring an older learner up to speed with their age-appropriate peers, failed learners who meet certain lowered standards should be advanced to the next grade (DBE, 2011). The policy states that even if a learner does not meet the requirements for promotion, they will still be advanced to the next grade depending on their age cohort or the number of years they have completed in the phase. Aphane (2022) argued that the South African educational system faces low learner performance, particularly in the low quintile schools (poor communities), due to the progression policy. As a result, Mogale and Modipane (2021) advocated that this could be one of the contributing reasons for the decline of Grade 12 national results in 2015 and 2016.

The implementation of the progression policy is of great concern to school principals and teachers. In South African schools, the progression policy is not always applied consistently, and the quality of education will be degraded if this approach is not carried out successfully (Hlasa, 2022).

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

“Progression” refers to the advancement of a learner from one grade to the next, except for Grade R, even though the learner has not met all promotion requirements. In South Africa, the policy that regulates the promotion and progression of learners from Grade R to Grade 12 is the National Protocol for Assessment (NPA). The NPA policy provides procedures for assessing learners’ achievement and ensuring that they are promoted to the next grade level based on their actual performance (DBE, 2017).

A high learner retention rate is a worldwide concern. The progression policy has been implemented to differing degrees in many countries, such as Norway, Denmark, Sweden, Japan, Korea, and certain states in the United States of America, to curb high levels of retention in schools. France and a number of developing nations employ learner progression as a tactic to retain learners in the education system. Primary school progression has been implemented in African nations like Uganda and Cameroon. Automatic class promotion has been successfully implemented in Cameroon because some primary school teachers are suitably trained to administer the policy (Hlasa, 2022).

Learner progression policy is a systematic intervention that aims to limit the retention of learners by ensuring that schools do not keep struggling learners in the school system for more than two years in any three-year phase (Khobe, 2022). The policy on learner progression in South Africa states that a learner should not spend more than four years in any phase. A learner can therefore fail only one grade in a phase; thereafter, a learner is progressed to the next phase even if the learner does not meet the stated requirement for promotion.

The DBE promulgated the learner progression policy as an intervention to counteract the retention policy, which allowed teachers to keep a struggling learner in a grade for as long as that learner did not meet the promotion requirements. The retention policy led to a high learner dropout rate in schools. Through the retention policy, struggling learners would be left behind by their age cohort and end up being in the same grade with much younger learners, something that would negatively affect their social development and behaviour. Research reveals that learner retention provided no evidence of academic improvement (Mogale, 2021). The learner progression policy aimed at retaining learners in the system to allow every learner an opportunity to attain an exit



qualification (HRSC, 2016). However, Khobe (2022) reported that over 66% of learners in South African schools drop out without attaining a matric certificate, citing academic difficulties as a possible cause.

As reported by the DBE (2016), a learner in the FET phase should satisfy the following requirements in order to be considered for progression: (1) should have failed to meet the promotion requirements for grades 10 or 11; (2) should have passed the language of learning and teaching (LoLT) and any other three subjects; (3) should have not been absent from school for more than 20 days without a valid reason; and (4) should have met the requirement for school-based assessment (SBA). Learners who have met the above requirements are progressed to the next grade even if they do not meet promotion requirements.

However, the policy on learner progression does not seem to attain its stated objective. Principals and teachers have received the policy with differing perceptions. Teachers' perceptions of policies, interpretations, and their influence on teaching and learning remain a continuing debate, as posited by Mogale and Malatji (2021), who reported that policies did not succeed or fail on their own merits; rather, their success depended on how they were implemented. The implementation of the policy is further challenged by contextual factors such as lack of resources, poor infrastructure, and overcrowded classes (Mogale & Malatji, 2021). For effective implementation of the progression policy, the DBE stipulates that each progressed learner should be provided with individualized curriculum support in order to bridge the content gap (DBE, 2016). According to Mogale and Modipane (2021), learner progression is one of the contributing factors to the recent decline in Grade 12 results in South Africa. They further reported that teachers are unable to provide individual attention to the progressed learners partly because classes are overcrowded, and because learners have different reasons for progression.

School principals report that many of the progressed learners still experience academic barriers and behavioural issues, including stealing from and harassing their classmates (Khobe, 2022). Khobe reported that teachers view progression as being problematic and very challenging. School principals argue that the progression policy results in learners expecting something for nothing, as they are not prepared to work on improving their levels of performance (Mogale & Malatji, 2021). According to Simpson and Goulder (2021), progressed learners are unable to keep up with the material in the next grade, and that affects the learners' self-esteem. Simpson and Goulder further reported that principals and teachers lamented that the progression policy adds to their workload as they are expected to give progressed learners extra support and individualised attention. Kika and Kotse (2019) reported that Grade 12 results reflect a higher pass rate when the progressed learners' percentages are excluded than when they are included. Teachers lament that the policy compromises quality education as progressed learners display limited desire to perform optimally. In the same vein, principals complain that progressed learners overload teachers with extra work in overcrowded classrooms, while at the same time teachers have to cover the prescribed syllabus within the time limits prescribed by the DBE in the annual teaching plan (ATP) (Kika & Kotse, 2019).

### 3. IMPLEMENTATION METHOD

The research methodology adopted in the study adopted the social identity theory (SIT) as a theoretical framework to which this study is aligned. The SIT is relevant for principals' observations of learners' progress in secondary schools since it clarifies and defines an individual's role in social contexts. According to the SIT, a person's sense of self is influenced by the groups that they belong to. It encompasses various processes, including social labelling and social grouping. The SIT states that to develop positive social identities, group members employ three strategies, namely: social change, social progress, and social motivation (Dlamini, 2021). The theory is grounded on the notion that a person's "self" is defined and evaluated considering the characteristics or behaviour that sets them apart from other members of a self-inclusive social group (Khobe, 2022).

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The social situation in this regard is a school where the progressed learners were advanced to the next grades, even though the learners did not meet all promotion requirements. As Dlamini indicated, some learners may be influenced by the group that they belong to. Costa et al. (2024) are of the same opinion that progressed learners encounter some challenges in a school situation. They feel humiliated and labelled by other learners and some of the teachers because they did not pass their previous grades but were progressed to the next grades. Therefore, based on the SIT, the progressed learners should be supported to develop positive social identities of social change, social progress, and social motivation to enable them to develop self-esteem. The positive social identities would motivate and encourage progressed learners to compare themselves to other learners in a positive way, to improve their performance, and to feel belonging to the school community.

#### **4. Research Paradigm**

The purpose of the investigation was to examine some principals' observations on learners' progression in South African secondary schools. A qualitative approach was employed as a research paradigm in the investigation, as a dynamic and exploratory approach that seeks to explore and comprehend the complexity of human experiences, behaviours, and social phenomena (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). The focus of qualitative research is on an in-depth examination to fully understand the subtleties and complexity of the topic being studied (Dehalwar & Sharma, 2024). Learners' progression is a social phenomenon, and, therefore, a qualitative approach is an appropriate method for an in-depth examination that can help the researcher to fully understand the principals' observations on learners' progression in secondary schools. In short, the research paradigm employed in the study constituted an interpretivist paradigm that sets out to interpret and construct knowledge based on the participants' perspectives and individual narratives based on their experiences and social interactions (Turin et al., 2024).

#### **5. Research Methods**

Purposive sampling was used in the study to sample three principals from Bahananwa Circuit in Limpopo Province and two principals from Mamusa Circuit in Northwest Province. All principals were from secondary schools, which had a high number of progressed learners and learners at risk in 2022. Purposive sampling allowed the researcher to choose individuals who were most likely to provide relevant and helpful information (Woodeson et al., 2023). Semi-structured interviews were then used as a method for the collection of research data, and these semi-structured interviews were audio-recorded, allowing the researcher to be attentive to the responses of the participants during the interviews. The recorded interviews were transcribed by a professional transcriber, who in turn gave the researcher notes for interpreting the data. An ethical clearance certificate was obtained from the University of South Africa (UNISA), and the approvals from Limpopo and the North-West Provincial Departments of Education were obtained prior to the commencement of the study.

#### **6. Research Findings**

The purpose of the study was to examine some principals' observations on learners' progression in secondary schools. For purposes of anonymity and confidentiality, participants were labeled as P1, P2, or P3 Circuit A (where Circuit A refers to Bahananwa) and P1 or P2 Circuit B (where Circuit B refers to Mamusa) to guarantee the security of their identification. The main objective of the present study conducted in Circuits A and B with principals of schools was to seek their views regarding the progressed learners. According to the progression policy, which was introduced in schools by the DBE, learners who failed to meet promotion requirements but who meet certain predetermined set of requirements should be progressed to the next grade. For a learner to progress to the next grade, the learner should at least pass the language of teaching and



learning with a minimum of 40% and pass three other subjects with a minimum of 30%. The other requirements are that the learner should not have been absent from school for more than 21 days in the year in which the learner should have progressed, and that such a learner should have a year mark. The rationale behind introducing the progression policy was to reduce the dropout rate and overcrowding in schools.

### 6.1 Class overcrowding

The research findings that principals were, in the first instance, not happy with the policy on learner progression. P1 Circuit A and P2 Circuit B lamented that progressing learners found it difficult to cope in their new classes because they did not meet the promotion requirements of the previous grade and therefore needed specialized attention. P1, P2 Circuit A, and P2 Circuit B lamented that teachers were unable to provide progressed learners with the special attention they needed, not because they did not want to, but because teachers were teaching in overcrowded classes (one principal reported to have more than 70 learners in each class), and they had to teach according to the pacesetter prescribed in the ATP.

### 6.2 Behavioural change

Behavioural change was a common factor in both circuits. It was reported that when the progressed learners did not cope with the demands of the new grade, they started to seek attention through unacceptable behaviour. P1 Circuit B complained that such learners start to bunk classes, arrive late at school, or dodge periods. Even though behavioural change was common in both circuits, P1 Circuit B was experiencing a serious concern where some of the progressed learners who started to engage in the use of drugs and alcohol. As P1 Circuit B reported:

“Dealing with the challenges caused by progressed learners takes more of the teaching and learning time. The move by the government to legalise dagga has added salt to the open wound because learners smoke dagga during breaks and come back to class very high. However, the issue of an adopted cop by the schools has slightly helped to foster obedience.”

### 6.3 Change of pass requirements

P2 Circuit A indicated that if he had the power to change the situation, he would start by raising the percentages for a pass requirement. He stated:

“The standard must be elevated so that when learners are progressed, they must have grasped higher portion of knowledge. If pass mark is higher than the current one (i.e. if the pass mark is 50%, then learners who obtain 45% may be progressed. I think they shall have gained higher mark than the current pass mark or pass of 30%).”

### 6.4 Reluctance to attend Extra Classes

Generally, principals were of the same opinion regarding the policy on progression. They did not support the policy. Progressed learners seemed to be reluctant when they were given extra activities to do. This is evident in the response given by P1 Circuit B:

“Our progressed learners seem to be very reluctant when extra classes are organised for them, but potential learners grab the opportunity of extra classes. We are really struggling, and we seem to be in a midst of frustration. Progressed learners are not able to participate during self-study periods.”

This is a reflection that principals find it hard to work with progressed learners. P2 Circuit B did not hesitate to respond to a question on what he would do if he had the power to make amendments to the policy on progression, stating:

“If I had a way, I would do away with it. Progressed learners, once they realised that they do not cope with the demands of the next grade, they start trouble both teachers and their classmates. Young teachers become reluctant to go to classes. We spent a lot of time that was supposed to be used for teaching, seating in the offices attending to disciplinary hearings for troublesome learners, most of which are progressed learners.”

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**6.5 Mastering the criteria for progression.**

P3 Circuit A shared the same sentiment regarding progressed learners and reports:

“The challenge may be that we may end up having a learner who did not pass from Grade 8 till 12, because they get the privilege of progression, some are condoned because of adjustments in mathematics and other subjects, because we are required to adjust three subjects in GET phase. I think this is a general challenge, because sometimes learner in our area learn and master how to be pushed, and they even master the criteria for progression. So, this result in principals getting stuck with high rate of ‘pushed’ learners than those who have worked hard to be in Grade 12. To me the policy is not doing well, because we end up with the product that is not doing well and not ready for the outside world after basic education.”

**6.6 Laziness**

Asked why progressed learners did not perform, P2 Circuit A attributed it to laziness on the part of the learners, which ultimately led to their failure to complete schoolwork. Participants from both circuits further reported that progressed learners did not try to reach out to their non-progressed peers for support.

**7 Discussion on the Research Findings**

The findings indicate that principals in both circuits were not happy about the progression policy because it contributed to the class overcrowding. Class overcrowding is experienced when the number of learners is greater than the number that the class is designed to accommodate. South African secondary classrooms are designed to accommodate a learner/teacher ratio of 40:1. Due to classroom overcrowding, predominantly in public schools, the number of learners exceeded the average (Joe & Mtsi, 2024). The learner/teacher ratio is higher than what the DBE recommends. Overcrowding is still the biggest issue facing schools, despite the DBE's effort to increase the number of schools. It has a detrimental impact on classroom management, teaching time, and school facilities (Nabila & Boudemagh, 2022). According to the principal P1 and P2 Circuit A, teaching and learning activities are compromised because teachers are unable to provide progressed learners with the necessary support due to classroom overcrowding, while they are expected to cover the prescribed syllabus within the time frames outlined in the ATP (Kika & Kotse, 2019).

Principals reported that some classes have accommodated more than 70 learners. In line with the principals, Joe and Mtsi (2024) mentioned that teachers are frequently faced with a large number of progressed learners in small classes together with those who shall have been promoted. Therefore, Mogale and Malatji (2021) argued that contextual issues, including inadequate infrastructure, overcrowded classes, and a lack of resources, made it difficult to implement the progression policy in schools.

According to the principals, the progressed learners who did not cope with the demands of the new grade resort to unacceptable behaviour. Khobe (2022) stated that some go as far as harassing teachers and their classmates. Principals indicated that “dealing with the challenges caused by progressed learners takes more of the teaching and learning time”. Progressed learners disrupt teaching and learning since some of them use illicit substances, which endanger other learners' safety in schools. Some of the progressed learners would not make the effort to reach out to non-progressed learners for assistance. This implies that they were not prepared or willing to make any effort to improve their performance. The situation is a burden to principals who indicated that if they had a way, they would do away with the progression policy. Ahmad et al., (2024) stated that secondary schools' learners have challenges in their academic pursuits as a result of behavioural problems. Learners' behaviour, social relationships, and emotional growth in the classroom have an impact on their academic achievement. Weak interpersonal ties and negative behaviour at school are signs of insufficient adjustment to the school setting. Positive classroom conduct and solid interpersonal ties, on the other hand, signify a good adjustment to the school



environment (Ahmad et al., 2024). It was also noted that the progressed learners were advanced to the next grades even though the learners had not met the promotion requirements. Some had not even passed Grade 8 but were progressed to Grade 12 because of the implementation of progression and adjustments to pass rates in some subjects like mathematics. However, P1 circuit A and P2 circuit B mentioned that some learners occasionally picked up the skill of “pushing” themselves but were not able to achieve the criteria for progression. Principals were consequently faced with a higher percentage of “pushed” learners than those who had put in a lot of effort to get to Grade 12.

According to the SIT, a person’s sense of self is influenced by the groups that they belong to. The progressed learners’ behaviour might be influenced by the fact that the school community knows their status. They might be labelled as “progressed” or even discriminated against in class. To develop positive social identities, they need motivation and support to change their behaviour and concentrate on their studies (Dlamini, 2021). Principals lamented that if they had their way, they would raise the pass requirement per subject to 50% and set 45% as a benchmark for progression. They assume that at that percentage they would have accumulated enough knowledge to at least cope in the next grade. According to principals, dealing with the challenges caused by progressing learners takes more teaching and learning time.

Despite all the challenges that principals faced with the progressed learners who are lazy and reluctant to engage in school activities, there is a growing demand for school principals to be accountable for the performance of their schools (Marsh, 2016). Accountability for school performance is a fundamental aspect of education systems worldwide. The principals’ role is associated with the demand for school performance, although they are tasked with multiple other duties such as administration and management (Shula & Heystek, 2024).

The situation between progressed learners and the school management is worsened by the fact that South African rural schools face other challenges such as poor parental involvement, which creates a paradoxical situation for the improvement of learner performance. A variety of factors, including teachers’ absenteeism, poverty, broken families, and illiterate parents also contribute towards poor learner performance. School principals also find it challenging to carry out their duties while the environment negatively influences learner performance and their work. Furthermore, although it is an essential part of the relationship between the school and the community and the responsibility of principals, the members of the school governing body (SGB) lack the necessary training or expertise to carry out their expected responsibilities (Zulu et al., 2021).

## 8 Recommendations

The purpose of the study on which the article is based was to examine principals’ observations on learner progression in South African secondary schools. Principals are the agents of implementation and change. To relieve the principals of their frustration, the DBE should provide them with the necessary support to enable them to implement the progression policy effectively. Inadequate infrastructure, class overcrowding, and lack of resources make it difficult for principals to implement the progression policy in their schools. The DBE should provide schools with the necessary infrastructure and the resources that will enable teachers and learners to engage effectively in classroom activities. Classroom overcrowding is not conducive to teaching and learning. It has a negative impact on learner discipline, monitoring, and the and the physical and mental health of both teachers and learners. School infrastructure and resources need urgent attention because they contribute to an unsafe school environment, poor teaching and learning, as well as poor performance and quality of education. The progressed learners do not cope with the new grades. According to the progression policy, the principal, teachers, and parents should join hands in collaborative decision-making based on progression guidelines during the implementation process. They should further develop plans on how the learner should be supported to ensure that the performance is improved. Both the school and the parents should be engaged in the support

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activities. If the stakeholders find that the learner will not cope in the new grade, they should agree on retaining the learner in the same grade and provide them with the necessary support. Without such support, the progression policy's poor implementation may result in poor school performance and a high percentage of dropouts.

The school community labels and stigmatises progressed learners; therefore, it is important to provide them with the encouragement and support they need to overcome this obstacle. Alternative strategies should be developed to support them in carrying out their school activities. This should not be a one-way process. Progressed learners should develop a positive mindset to change their behaviour and willingly focus on their studies. They should engage with fellow learners for further assistance. Professional assistance should be provided to them, including motivational talks, counselling, safety, and drug abuse campaigns.

Principals and teachers should receive continuous training and support on how to implement the progression policy effectively to avoid a universally applicable tick-box approach. Enrichment programmes, sufficient resources, curriculum monitoring, appropriate support, and stakeholder communication are a few prerequisites for the progression policy's successful execution. Principals, teachers, and learners should be provided with professional help at their different levels to relieve their frustrations.

## **9. Conclusion**

The aim of this article was to examine principals' observations on learner progression in South African secondary schools. The findings indicate that principals in both Bahananwa and Mamusa circuits are not happy with the progression policy. According to the principals, they are struggling to implement the policy. They find themselves in the midst of frustration because they cannot effectively implement the progression policy in schools due to contextual factors such as inadequate infrastructure, overcrowded classes, and a lack of resources. They find it challenging to fully monitor each learner's progress and to give each of them individualised attention that might be required by the progression policy.

Progressed learners do not cope with the demands of the next grade because some of them have since been progressed to Grade 12 without having achieved promotion based on performance in the lower grades. Progressed learners got used to the progression process, and they were reluctant and unmotivated to engage in the learning activities. They resorted to laziness and unacceptable behaviour, which required more attention from the principal and the teachers. Learner performance is compromised because teachers become demoralized and develop low self-esteem. Teachers are expected to cover the prescribed syllabus within the time frames outlined in the ATP. As a result, unfavourable work conditions affect the teachers' wellbeing as well as the quality of teaching and learning. The principals expressed the desire to have the power to change the pass percentage prescribed in the progression policy, hoping that the progressed learners would work hard to achieve better marks to qualify for progression.

Notwithstanding the challenges and frustrations that principals are facing regarding the support of the progressed learners who are not willing to engage in school activities, they are still held accountable for the performance of their schools. Therefore, the progression policy is a burden to secondary school principals, and they advocate that:

“If I had a way, I would do away with it”.





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