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IMPLEMENTATION OF THE LEARNER PROGRESSION POLICY PROVISION AND INTERVENTION IN SUPPORT OF PROGRESSED LEARNERS WITHIN THE SENIOR PHASE: A CASE STUDY OF TWO DIFFERENT GAUTENG PUBLIC SCHOOLS

A research report submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master's by Coursework and Research Report (MEd) HCA00 with specialisation in Educational Leadership and Policy Studies (ELPS)

School of Education, University of the Witwatersrand

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2023

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I, **Farzaana Suleman,** Student number: **719173** know and accept that Academic Misconduct (i.e. any action which gains, attempts to gain, or assists others in gaining or attempting to gain an unfair academic advantage including plagiarism, collusion, cheating, copying, contract cheating, fabrication of data, the use and/or possession of unauthorised materials or devices during an assessment; and falsification or misrepresentation of information including, falsification of a medical certificate, and/or changing a script after it has been marked) violates the principles of integrity and honesty that form the foundation on which scholarship is built.

Please confirm the following:

I, Farzaana Suleman (719173) declare that the Master's Research Report, entitled, Implementation of the Learner Progression Policy Provision and Intervention in Support of Progressed Learners within the Senior Phase: A Case Study of Two Gauteng Public Schools**,** and handed in on the date below is my own unaided work.

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Signed: F. Suleman. **Date: 15 February 2024**

DECLARATION

I declare that this research report, titled “Implementation of the Learner Progression Policy: Provision and Interventions in Support of Progressed Learners within the Senior Phase: A Case Study of Two Gauteng Public Schools” is my work.

It is submitted for the degree of Master’s by Coursework and Research Report (MEd), at the University of the Witwatersrand, School of Education, Johannesburg.

It has not been submitted for any other degree or examination at any other university. All sources have been acknowledged and indicated employing complete references.

F. Suleman.

_____

Farzaana Suleman

Date: 15 February 2024

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I would like to dedicate this project to my family, who have always been there for me through my ups and downs. They have sincerely endured my long hours in completion of my studies. Additionally, they have encouraged me and believed that I could conquer my difficulties despite my challenges when I felt I could no longer go on.

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ABSTRACT

In South Africa and globally academic learner performance is a huge concern. The National Policy for Assessment (NPA) explains that Grade R – 12 learners are either promoted or progressed from one grade to the next. The National Policy Pertaining to the Programme and Progression Requirements (NPPPR) states that the Department of Education (DBE) defines progression as the advancement of a learner from one grade to the next, excluding Grade R, despite the learner not having complied with all the promotion requirements.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the implementation challenges of the learner progression policy in two South African Gauteng Schools through the perceptions of the teaching staff, school management teams, and principals. Further to this, the reasons behind learner progression are explored with a focus on intervention strategies to assist teachers in developing these progressed learners.

For this study, a qualitative interpretive paradigm is adopted. The data is generated through semi-structured in-contact open-ended interview questions to explore participant's diverse opinions, interpretations, and meaning-making of the progression policy and its implementation over a broad spectrum. In addition to this, data was generated through the collection of documents. These documents include reports about learner performance, school improvement plans, individual learner support or intervention plans, and SNA (Support Needs Assessment Form) documents in school B. These documents collected were analysed to enrich the data of the relevant categories under themes and sub-themes identified.

The outcome of this study reveals that educational policies are often adapted, and mediated by policy implementers as they make meaning of the policy in their diverse contexts. The study revealed that the learner progression policy and its implementation are challenging and complex for all stakeholders of the selected schools. These stakeholders include teachers and SMT members (Principals and Heads of Departments or HODs). Progression is problematic because learners have constant learning difficulties in the grades that they are promoted to as they continue to suffer serious knowledge gaps.

Intervention strategies to assist progressed learners are not sufficient and need to start with better teacher training led by the Department of Basic Education (DBE)

and the districts. The training must also target the reinforcement of learner language skills to eliminate their language barriers, parental support, and support programmes that are learner-specific and not generalised. It is noted that the progression of learners has a detrimental impact on teachers' daily teaching which must 'make up' for learner knowledge gaps, poor work ethic, and bad behaviour which makes it highly impossible to keep up.

ACRONYMS

ABD – Atypical Brain Development

ADD – attention deficit disorder.

ADHD – attention deficit hyperactivity disorder

DBE – Department of Basic Education

DBST – District-based Support Teams

Education WP6 – Education White Paper 6

FET – Further Education and Training

GDE – Gauteng Department of Education

GET – General Education and Training

HOD – HOD of Department (also known as DHs or Departmental Heads)

LSEN – Learners with special education needs

LTSM – Learning and Teaching Support Material

MEO – Multiple Examination Opportunity

NPA – National Policy Assessment

NPPPR – National Policy Pertaining to the Programme and Progression Requirements

PLs – Progressed Learners

SADTU – The South African Democratic Teachers Union

SBST – School-Based Support Team

SIAS – Policy on Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support.

SMT – School Management Team

SNA – Support Needs Assessment Form

SPP – School Progression Policy

UNESCO – United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Section 29(1) of the South African constitution notes that every learner has the right to an accessible and equal education (Veriava, Thom & Hodgson, 2017). However, despite efforts to centralize education for all, South Africa had a staggering amount of 400,000 to 500,000 dropouts in 2021 (UNESCO, 2012) which has significantly increased to 750,000 in 2022 (Adu and Zondo, 2022). The dropout rate has become such a salient education problem in South Africa that the Department of Basic Education (DBE) decided among other things to introduce the learner progression policy.

The learner progression policy was initially introduced in 1998 to the General Education and Training (GET) Phase (Grades R – 9) and was endorsed later in the Further Education and Training (FET) phase. By 2011, the National Policy about the Program and Promotion Requirements (NPPPR) of the National Curriculum Statement (NCS) for grades R – 12 stipulated that learner progression was mandatory for all schooling phases. It was formally introduced to the system in 2013 and became fully implemented by 2015 (Ngema & Maphalala, 2021; Nkosi & Adebayo, 2021).

The learner progression policy stipulates that a learner may only fail or be retained one time per phase, minimizing repetition to four years throughout the 12-year school system (Nkosi & Adebayo, 2021). The Department of Basic Education (DBE, 2011) defines learner progression as the move of learners from one to the next grade (excluding grade R) even if they have not attained the standard curriculum requirement of that grade.

There have been arguments that learner progression is an injustice to the education system and the learners as it puts both in a worse predicament (Brahmbhatt, 2020). Teachers feel frustrated in dealing with ill-equipped and underprepared learners (George, 2019). As far as many promoted struggling learners are concerned, the consequences for them are often dire because there are often no adequate school support programmes or appropriate interventions to assist them in catching up. These learners become demotivated and subsequently perform poorly (Mogale & Modipane, 2021). According to George (2019), many progressed learners fail to obtain a minimum pass matric certificate.

In 2015, the South African Democratic Teachers Union (SADTU) stated that, the ineffective implementation of the learner progression policy, led to the failure of many struggling learners. This then undermined the education system and the matriculation results instead of bringing about positive outcomes. This matches my reality of teaching in a primary school when I witnessed teachers manipulating or tweaking learner results for the main reason of avoiding the completion of lengthy paperwork to fail learners. This would subsequently lead to underperforming or ill-equipped learners feeding into the subsequent years of schooling with further progression, failure, or achieving poor matric results because these learners were accustomed to receiving “free” marks. This defeats the policy's intention as these struggling learners move through the school system without acquiring the necessary skills and knowledge to succeed in the post-secondary schooling phase of their lives.

Despite the negativity surrounding the learner progression policy, many scholars have argued that South Africa has well-written and applicable public policies to address educational challenges (Mogale & Modipane, 2021; Tebele, 2016). However, these policies are often difficult to implement in context, not only because of the lack of resources but most importantly because of problems of cognition to interpret these policies for implementation. This can come from a lack of training, policy knowledge, and/or experience in contextualizing policy implementation. For instance, in the case of the learner progression policy, I have come across situations whereby teachers do not intervene or give support lessons to struggling learners because they do not know how to diagnose the academic weaknesses of learners, how to select activities or resources to enhance the skills and knowledge of struggling learners, how to continue with relevant intervention or support or what to do when it comes to differentiated teaching and learning. These interventions also delay them and yet they feel the need to comply and adhere to curriculum coverage according to the syllabus or curriculum policy.

When teachers don’t know how to “fix” the academic problems of struggling learners, they prefer to make it easier for these learners by teaching to the test or by giving learners marks for tasks they do not work for. This suggests that the learner progression policy is not implemented effectively for many reasons and the

implementation processes defeat or go against the intention of the policy (Mogale & Modipane, 2021).

1.1. Problem Statement

The learner progression policy aims to reduce learner repetition and promote age-grade appropriateness so that learners are not under or over-aged in a phase or grade (Motala, Dieltiens & Sayed, 2009). This policy aims to detect underperforming learners and learners at risk of failure early enough for schools and teachers to design and implement intervention programs (George, 2019). However, it is a policy that entails serious implementation challenges which differ from one country to another. The learner progression policy, also known as the school progression/social promotion or automatic promotion policy in other parts of the world, differs in the nature and effectiveness of its implementation. For instance, as is explored in the literature review, in countries such as Ireland, the United Kingdom, Korea, Japan, Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Portugal, and Norway, the progression policy is relatively well implemented in the different schooling years and is seen as an effective policy to counter the negativity attached with grade repetition. This is in general because these countries have well-developed education systems, with strong remediation interventions and significant investments in resources to assist with the progression of policy implementation (Stott, Dreyer & Venter, 2015).

In African countries such as Uganda and more especially Cameroon, the progression policy implementation is not as effective because of the inadequate resources available to schools and teachers (Nalova, 2016). In South Africa, there are many challenges in implementing the progression. Kika and Kotze (2019) identify challenges such as different interpretations of the policy at the school level, and little to no differentiated support interventions for struggling learners because of the teachers' heavy workloads and the fast pace of the curriculum. As a result, many learners struggle with their grades when they progress to the next grade, and they continue to underperform and misbehave because of their continuous underperformance (Florian & Linklater, 2010).

After the learner baseline assessment at the beginning of the year, teachers do not know how to understand and cope with the exact nature of the learners' learning barriers, let alone develop appropriate support interventions for them. Some learners

with average to serious learning barriers cannot cope with mainstream schooling and they are unable to adapt to the normal school learning environments, regardless of the attention given by their grade teachers (Ngcezulla, 2018; Mahlomaholo, 2014). Learners with serious learning barriers or special educational needs (LSEN) should be moved from mainstream schooling to schools for special educational needs. The process of referring learners to accommodating schools can be done as early as grade 1 (Ngcezulla, 2018). It involves the school-based Support Teams (SBST) and District-based Support Teams (DBST) which will make recommendations to assist such learners (Ngcezulla, 2018). The government has allocated more financial, material, and human resources in the last decade to support struggling learners (especially with specialized teachers and educational psychologists) but this has not made much difference in the smooth implementation of the progression policy (Munje & Maarman, 2016).

Referring struggling learners to schools that will accommodate their specific academic needs is part and parcel of the requirements under the inclusive education policy. The Education White Paper 6 (WP6) states that the Screening, Identification, Assessment, and Support (SIAS) policy guidelines will ensure inclusivity for all learners and will assist in improving educational support of struggling learners through outlining and supporting the processes and access to education to suit learners with serious learning barriers and learners who have progressed (Ngcezulla, 2018).

Yet, my teaching practice made me aware that the process of referring a struggling learner as explicated under the SIAS guidelines is extremely time-consuming and a difficult added teacher responsibility. These guidelines are lengthy and range from the school to the district.

They first stipulate that, to establish the educational needs of struggling learners, teachers are expected to draw up a support needs assessment 1 form (SNA1) and evaluation documents of such learners as an observation of the identified learners. Teachers must then describe areas of concern in the SNA1 documents and immediately inform the parent(s) of the identified learner before any intervention. These identified barriers may be and are not limited to mild learning barriers, physical, and intellectual disabilities, dyslexia, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder

(ADHD), and economic and/or emotional imbalances. Once the parent's consent to the intervention process, the forms are finalized, and the learners are expected to be supported through in-classroom interventions which the teachers become responsible for.

If classroom intervention fails, then the learners are referred to the School-Based Support Team (SBST). The SBST along with the teachers meet to comprehend and review the support provided by the teachers through a SNA2. An Individual Support Plan (ISP) is then developed by the SBST and teachers to identify and render the support needed by the learners. If the intervention support still fails, the learners are referred to the DBST by filling in a DBE 120 form which is referred to as a Request for Support from the DBST (RSA DBE, 2014).

The district support teams then conduct their own set of tests, and the parents are contacted to consent to have the learners referred to an expert for further evaluation. The DBE uses the SNA3 form to report on DBST intervention provided to learners and review the support provided at the school level. It is then determined and indicated by the DBST whether the interventions at the school level are of a low, moderate or high level of support given the learners' learning barriers (Hodgson & Khumalo, 2016; RSA DBE, 2014).

In the end, the struggling learners who are moved to more accommodating schools are lucky, but it often depends on whether the evaluations are well done. If not, as time proceeds, these learners are still caught up in the same process of evaluation by subsequent teachers as they progress through the further phases with no effective classroom solution or support programs designed for them in mainstream schooling.

This explains why this study intends to research the learner progression policy implementation challenges, including the current and potential strategies to assist struggling learners in mainstream schooling to contribute to a better understanding of what is needed to promote a more effective implementation of this policy in most South African schools.

1.2. Purpose and Rationale of the study

1.2.1. Personal and Professional Level

At a personal level, the motivation to embark on this topic of study is derived from my experiences of being a teacher in the past six years teaching many learners who struggled academically. My experience is that many learner's progress to the next grade level with very limited knowledge in many subjects. They fail their diagnostic (baseline) tests administered at the beginning of the year; they don't cope during the year, they resort to class disruptions because of their lack of concentration or commitment, and they often don't succeed in passing the next grade at the end of the year. This puts a lot of pressure on teachers as they have never been given specialized training to support these struggling learners who also happen to be increasingly disinterested. In my teaching, I witnessed many of these learners progressing to the next grade, year in and year out, but they struggle with grasping the grade-level content and meeting teacher expectations, which results in them becoming frustrated and disinterested.

Being a teacher of the senior phase, I understand that special consideration in the implementation of the learner progression policy in the senior phase is required as this phase is the stepping stone for learners to enter the FET phase and complete grade 12. My thoughts and interest in this topic grew further with my many encounters with my senior phase colleagues and teacher friends. I can say that a lot of us share a common belief that learners, who do progress from one grade to another without the proper intervention plans and support provided in their schooling, eventually lead to failure and yet further learner progression. This causes a lot of frustration for professional teachers especially because they wish and feel obliged to ensure that their learners excel and build in their educational endeavors (Bhagwonparsadh 2021; Mogale & Modipane, 2021).

1.2.2. Academic Level

Because of my personal and professional experiences with the progression of policy implementation, it became important for me to do this research to understand the debates and arguments of the local and international literature.

The national and international literature (Kika & Kotze, 2019; Mogale & Modipane, 2021) questions the effectiveness of the learner progression policy and its implementation, as well as the determinants or conditions required for an effective implementation.

It is said that the aim of the learner progression policy is often defeated in South African schools because progressed learners are eventually drained from expectations and simply fail along the way before their matric exams (Branson, Lannoy & Kahn, 2019). Mogale and Modipane (2021) confirm that the learner progression policy is one of the reasons behind the decline in the number of learners completing grade 12. They also explain that the policy implementation process is problematic because of the lack of effective diagnosis and adequate intervention programs for struggling learners (Mogale & Modipane, 2021).

As such, successful implementation for positive results requires a change in the commitment and involvement of all stakeholders: the learners, teachers, parents, school management teams, and district officials. Not much literature records the effectiveness of the learner progression policy, nor its effective implementation to reach the desired outcomes, especially in the South African context. However, internationally, the implementation of the progression policy (referred to as social/automatic promotion policy) has been successful in some countries and not in others. Studies conducted in Ireland, the United Kingdom, Britain, Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Iceland, Portugal, Chicago, Greece, and Norway, found successful policy implementation strategies due to varying circumstances like the availability of resources, strong remediation systems, clear-cut structures, and the ability of teachers to address and fill knowledge gaps of progressed struggling learners.

Further to this, the automatic/social promotion policy is seen to be the most cost-effective alternative to retaining learners in these countries. Additionally, the literature reveals that Cameroon in Africa has effective policy implementation strategies such as active teaching methods and the compliance of teachers and head teachers to the pedagogic (teaching) and administrative (paperwork, planning, etc) prescriptions required for effective policy implementation (Tani, 2018). Also, teachers in Turkey were found to have implemented the policy very well due to their immense training and knowledge. In Japan and Finland, learners attend workshops, and their

progression is highly supported by the education system ensures that schools are not only well-equipped but also have highly skilled teachers who know how to tackle learning barriers. By contrast, other countries like Botswana, Kenya, Nigeria, and Rwanda find that the implementation of the progression policy emanates from political will and corruption, lack of planning in policy implementation after the development of policy, by not considering how teachers are going to be properly trained, supported and monitored, poor motivation of teachers lack guidance and counselling services (Ramputla, 2020; Tani & George, 2019). Further implications of ineffective policy implementation in these countries are the lack of quality of education by adjusting assessments to suit progressed learners and lowering the standards of achievement (Mogale & Malatji, 2022).

Hence, my experience and the literature provide me with the interest to investigate conceptually and empirically how various stakeholders view and respond to the policy, their main implementation challenges, and the support programmes in place.

1.3. Aim of the Study

The study aims to identify the main implementation challenges of the progression policy within two different public schools and the impact they have. To do so, the first objective is to understand the perceptions of teachers, HODs, and Principals about the progression policy and how these stakeholders respond to the policy. The second objective is to explore the teaching staff's implementation challenges and the third objective is to examine the current and/or potential intervention strategies towards the struggling progressed learners and whether or how to assist them with adequate support.

1.4. Main Research Question

What are the learner progression policy implementation challenges found in a quintile two school versus a quintile four school?

1.5. Sub-Research Questions

a. What are the teachers, HODs, and principal's understanding and views of the causes of learners with learning barriers?

b. What are the teachers, HODs, and principals' views about the aim and rationale of the learner progression policy?
c. What are the implementation challenges encountered by the teaching staff in their classroom regarding learner progression?
d. What forms of response and support do teachers use and need to assist the struggling learners?
e. How do SBST and the district support team (DSBT) follow up and monitor learners with learning barriers and is it assisting them?

1.6. Significance of the Study

The findings of this research study can hopefully point to how to monitor these progressed learners and devise adequate support strategies to alleviate their progression (Nkosi & Adebayo, 2021; Gubbels, Van Der Put & Assink., 2019). This study seeks to create awareness that learner progression often has a detrimental impact on the livelihoods of these learners who don't complete matric as the completion of schooling is an important survival technique in our everchanging world (Nengwekhulu, 2021; Gubbels et al, 2019). This investigation hopes to contribute to the literature on identifying recommendations and suggestions for further research on the policy implementation challenges and the support needed by teachers and progressed learners.

1.7. Definition of Core Concepts

The terms social or learner promotion, learner retention, and progression are terms that are used interchangeably to describe the moving of learners from one grade to another because of the school progression policy (SPP), also known as the progression policy (Ntombela, 2011). It is therefore crucial for the study at hand to have a firm explanation of what these terms mean by looking at the literature as well as what is involved with the South African progression policy and its implementation challenges. The key definitions are explained below.

Learner Promotion/Social Promotion

Learner promotion or social promotion differs from learner progression as the former, unlike the latter, is when the learner moves on to the next grade by having met the

minimum requirements to be promoted. Thus, the learner would have passed all necessary subjects (Department of Education, 2015).

Retention

This means keeping a learner in the same grade for another year to enable him/her to mature academically as it is believed to be beneficial to the retained learner (Jimerson & Renshaw, 2012).

Learner Progression Policy/The Progression Law

The learner progression policy or progression law (Stott et al., 2015) is known in other countries as the automatic promotion, social promotion, and grade promotion policy. This is so because different countries such as South Africa and internationally refer to the same concept utilizing different terminology (Tani & George, 2019; Mogale & Modipane, 2021). Progression happens when a learner has already repeated a grade in the phase and then moves on to the next grade despite not having met the requirements with support measures tailored to suit the academic abilities of the learner (DBE, 2015).

The learner progression policy has a vital impact on the education system. It is key to not only prohibit learners from spending more than four years in a grade but also, intends to curb the number of high school learner dropouts.

The implementation of the policy of learner Progression

The concept of implementation of the progression policy can be defined as the act or the process by which significant plans of an organization/school are actioned to ensure the policy is executed (Viennet & Pont, 2017). There are many school implementation challenges (Mogale & Modipane, 2021) that are due to the underprepared and overwhelmed teachers, especially when they are also confronted by extreme poverty and poor working conditions (Munje & Maarman, 2016).

Chapter one consisted of the introduction, background, problem statement, purpose and rationale, the study's aim, main and sub-research questions, the significance of the study, as well as the definitions of core concepts. Chapter two provides a literature review leading to a theoretical framework. Chapter Three deals with the

research design and methodology. Chapter four presents the data collected while Chapter five analyses and interprets the data from the fieldwork and Chapter six ends with the discussion, conclusion, and recommendations of the study.

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The literature review is a fundamental aspect of empirical research to build on prior knowledge, previous papers, and knowledge gaps (Baumeister, 2013). This literature review examines international and local literature debates about learner progression vs retention and the progression policy implementation. The literature chosen for this review covers 11 years (from 2011 to 2022) with some exceptions made to include some 2005 literature.

This literature review discusses six themes: 1) Learner dropout in the South African context and factors contributing to it, which include broad socio-economic factors, factors at the level of the school, the family and the learners; 2) Debates about grade retention vs grade progression 3) Unpacking what policy means as discourse and as text, 4) Debates around policy and policy implementation challenges, 5) The progression policy and its implementation challenges in South African schools, 6) Support interventions from various school stakeholders to assist progressed learners.

2.1. Background and factors contributing to learner dropout in South African schools.

Before reviewing the debates about the progression policy and its implementation, it seems important to understand the phenomenon that the policy intends to address and counter, namely the learner dropout and its causes.

Learner dropout can be defined as learners leaving the education system without completing compulsory education. This is due to many reasons, including personal decisions, external circumstances, or the failure to obtain the required minimum schooling academic credentials (Runhare, Ouda, Vele & Mudzielwana, 2021; Karacabey & Boyacı, 2018). Dropping out of school is a renowned, challenging, and complex problem to deal with. The factors of learner dropout act as multifaceted

influences that come from, inter alia, socio-economic factors, the education system, school, family, and individual factors (Weybright, Caldwell, Xie, Wegner & Smith, 2017).

South Africa is known for its high learner dropout rates, especially at the secondary and even tertiary education levels. At the end of 2011, it was statistically found that only 44% of black learners between 23 and 24 years old had completed secondary schooling whilst approximately 40% of learners that entered the schooling system dropped out after failing multiple times (Grossen, et al., 2017). Learner dropout is often linked to the ills posited by the South African apartheid government (Runhare et al., 2021; Van Der Berg & Gustafsson, 2019) because learners, especially black learners, have not benefited from quality compulsory education, compared to white learners with their superior quality schooling (Grossen, Grobler & Lacante, 2017; Sing & Maringe, 2020; Mckeever, 2017).

The DBE (2014) mentions that the many barriers or obstacles to learning that hinder learners' access to proper learning come from different sources. They can come from the broad social system, from the education system, or because of internal factors affecting schools and learners. External barriers include broader socioeconomic factors like substance (alcohol and drugs) abuse, unemployment, child-headed homes, and community violence to name a few. There are also factors linked to the education system, that are beyond the control of schools and learners, such as the system policies or efforts to accommodate the needs of the diverse learners with learning barriers (Walton et al., 2009). Intrinsic barriers or obstacles within the schools and the learners include poor school and teachers' intervention strategies, learners' physical and cognitive impairments, emotional disorders, language barriers, and different intellectual capacities (Walton et al., 2009).

All these different factors that cause permanent or temporary learner dropout impact whether a policy of learner progression and its implementation can be effective and make a difference.

2.1.1. Broader Socio-Economic Factors

The socioeconomic factors that lead to temporary or permanent learner dropout include poverty, unemployment, and violence in communities as well as poor

household income which negatively affect learners and their schooling (Murray, 2014). These factors play a role in keeping learners out of school and impacting negatively their learning. For instance, learners from a family of poverty and unemployment are sometimes expected at times to find ways of earning some money for the family instead of going to school. This then increases the chances of learners being ill-prepared to succeed in their studies because of the knowledge gap they create and accumulate. Violence in communities also feeds into learner dropout because learners can be kept at home for their safety or to prevent them from being targeted while walking to school. Gang violence can target the communities and the schools leading to school operations being put on hold, with teaching and learning time being lost. Thus, these broader socio-economic factors can make it difficult for some learners to cope emotionally and academically and succeed in the school system (Mogale & Malatji, 2023).

2.1.2. Education System Policies

Reforms in the education system can be designed with good intent but they can also de facto create problems for learners who may be at risk of dropping out. For instance, the problem of the language of instruction not being in the learners' mother tongue can contribute to learners' learning barriers or dropout. A study in Saudi Arabia (Khan, 2011) argues that the linguistic policy of an education system influences learners' barriers because many learners are dissatisfied with the language of teaching and learning (English) which constitutes a threat to their cognition and understanding of curricula as English is not their mother-tongue language. These learners feel less motivated to learn and are not willing to read or write in the language of teaching and learning despite the Saudi government spending a lot of money on the educational sector (Khan, 2011).

The immigration situation in many countries makes many learners with a range of different cultural, sub-cultural, and language abilities struggle to adjust and adapt to their 'new-normal' school situation. Hence, Adelman and Taylor (2017) argue that immigrant learners with different mother tongue education lack the readiness for new school environments and develop slower than their peers.

Another issue that is linked to the education system is identified by Adelman and Taylor (2017) who mentioned that the curricula of foundational/early grade schools

don’t sufficiently develop learners’ ability to grasp the necessary skills that they require cognitively. They point out that kindergarteners do not adequately develop learners’ visual perceptual capacity to discriminate between letters or make auditory discrimination between words. Therefore, the learners’ future becomes dampened from an early stage as they fall behind with the educational demands of the primary and secondary educational system (Adelman & Taylor, 2017) which resembles the situation of many black learners in South Africa.

Zwane and Malale (2018) in their Swazi study focus on different factors within the education system that make it difficult to deal with learners’ learning barriers. The first one is the lack of teacher training to teach learners with learning barriers. Teacher training does not touch on the teachers’ responsibilities and competencies needed to teach diverse learners. Teachers are often unqualified or underqualified to provide learners with differentiated instruction, to modify and adapt the curricula to meet the standards and needs of learners (Zwane and Malale, 2018).

Zwane and Malale (2018) also blame the poor and rigid curriculum delivery which does not accommodate learners with different learning needs, unqualified and underqualified teachers, lack of support for teachers, inappropriate teaching and learning methods and support material which all hamper teaching and learners’ academic outcomes (Zwane & Malale, 2018). Due to this rigid curriculum and teacher under-preparedness, the study mentioned that teachers often battle with issues of low esteem in teaching learners, negative attitudes towards these learners, a lack of innovative practices, and little teaching adaptation or improvisation as well as significant uncertainty on how to deal with disciplinary issues in the classroom (Zwane and Malale, 2018).

Another education policy reform associated with learners struggling or dropping out is the learner progression policy, also known as social /automatic promotion or progression. Many countries have introduced this intervention policy to reduce learner dropout which is a determinant to minimize the costs involved in learners repeating a grade; it is expected to build the confidence of struggling learners and improve their academic performance as well as their desire to try better in the next grade (Mogale & Malatji, 2023). However, the problem with social promotion/ automatic promotion in many countries is that it can be detrimental to learners who

are deluded into progressing over time, thinking that they have grasped the necessary knowledge and skills of the grade, but which does not reflect their realities. This in turn can lead to the unintended consequence of provoking further learner dropout because these deluded learners who thought that they were achieving something realize that they are uneducated or unprepared to find a job and contribute to the economy (Stott et al., 2015). This means that a learner progression policy is not enough because it should be accompanied by interventions in other areas such as in the schools and with the teachers and learners.

2.1.3 School Factors

There are school-level factors that contribute to learner dropout or learners' learning barriers. These include a lack of conducive school culture and atmosphere, poor school leadership, teachers with a poor commitment to their work, as well as poor school infrastructure and resources, and poor pedagogy (Omollo 2013; Kalinga, 2013; Sahin, Arseven & Kiliç, 2016).

Sahin et al (2016) mention that a negative school atmosphere associated with poor leadership, bad learners' behaviours, bullying, poor relationships between stakeholders, and in particular negative teacher-to-learner relationships can severely undermine learners' interests in school. Furthermore, teachers can lack the commitment to their profession and act unmotivated with teaching, doing the minimum to collect a salary every month and all this can also lead to learner dropout (Kalinga, 2013; Murray, 2014; Sahin et al, 2016; Townsend, Flisher & King, 2007).

Teacher unpreparedness to deal with learning barriers is also an issue. Schools can become places that don't motivate learners because of the lack of sociocultural activities and the heavy subject loads associated with the demanding difficult curriculum (Sahin et al, 2016). The lack of LTSM, overcrowded classes, and underqualified teachers also contribute to some learners experiencing academic struggles and/or dropouts (Engelbrecht, Nel, Smit & Van Deventer, 2016). Finally, schools and teachers are not trained on how to diagnose learners' barriers and how to design adequate intervention strategies for teachers to follow up and support the progressed learners.

The learner progression policy on its own will not assist these school issues and must be accompanied by additional measures that improve schools' capacity.

2.1.4. Family Factors

Parent-to-school relationship

Positive parental involvement, cooperation, and partnerships with schools are fundamental prerequisites for learners' effective schooling (Nojaja, 2009, as cited by Mnguni, 2013). So, one of the main root causes of high learner dropout, or learner retention and progression originates from the home (Mnguni, 2013). The literature suggests that learners' learning barriers can come from homes headed by a single parent (a mother only) (Townsend et al., 2007; Ouma, Ting & Pesha, 2017) and a lack of parental control due to parents' long working hours as these open the ground for learners' lack of attention or interest at school. That is why Sahin et al (2016) argue that additional interventions such as learner supervision after school hours have to accompany the learner progression policy.

Parent-to-child relationship

A problematic parent-to-child relationship also contributes to a poor relationship with the school that educates the learner. Personal family problems like parental divorce, marriage, domestic violence, and parental poor health or early death have an emotional impact on learners, especially those of a young school-going age (Sahin et al., 2016). Such vulnerable children who are emotionally drained can hide and stay at home rather than be at school (Karacabey & Boyaci, 2018). This would then impact the performance of learners in achieving the pass requirements. The learner progression policy on its own will not assist learners with such problems and additional interventions should target these issues.

2.1.5. Individual factors

Teenage Pregnancy

According to Weybright et al., (2017), there is a higher learner dropout among female learners. Challenges like teenage early pregnancy (during the ages of 13 to 19 years old) lead to female learner dropout (Mnguni, 2013; Weybright et al., 2017).

Mnguni (2013) mentions that adolescent mothers are unlikely to return to school due to the many complications that they are likely to experience compared to older females in grade 12 (Mokoena & van Breda, 2021). The learner progression policy on its own will not assist these adolescent mothers. and must be accompanied by additional measures dealing with such issues.

Substance - Abuse

Alcohol, cigarettes, and drugs are known to play a major role in the high school learner dropout (Nengwekhulu, 2021). Mnguni (2013) explains that learners who use cigarettes try out other substances like marijuana and nyaope (a drug). The consequences of substance abuse are not limited to learner underperformance but include behavioural issues (Mokeona & Breda, 2021; Ramputla, 2020; Weybright et al., 2017). The learner progression policy on its own will not assist these learners who have accumulated and continue to accumulate major knowledge gaps and must be accompanied by additional measures dealing with such issues.

Learner Absenteeism

Learner absenteeism disrupts the quality of teaching and learning within the classroom. Upon the return of absentees, teachers feel obliged to assist or monitor these learners during their break times and after teaching hours. However, when these follow-up classes exist, they are often not attended by these unmotivated learners which makes teachers less committed to offering a catch-up class to these learners. What is needed are additional mechanisms that encourage and stimulate these learners to catch up on missed work (Otto, 2016; Sahin et al, 2016).

Developmental learning disabilities

These are disabilities that are acquired throughout the developmental stages of learners. These are and are not limited to mental or neurological factors, physical factors, and emotional factors (Engelbrecht et al., 2016). There is also atypical brain development (ABD) disorder which does not represent a specified disorder or disease, but is a term used to address a full range of problematic developmental orders (Gilger & Kaplan, 2001). Neurological factors found within a child can stem from brain anomalies described as perceptual problems, the inability to process

information and the inability to discriminate auditory, and visual stimuli resulting from foetal alcohol syndrome.

Physical factors can be poor motor functionality and chronic illnesses like allergies affecting oral language. Emotional factors can be described as attention deficit disorder (ADD) and the inability of learners to concentrate or pay attention in class because of family or community-related factors. These barriers could be minimized through the integration of support mechanisms by specialised teachers, adults, visual, sensory stimulation, and information technology (IT) resources amongst others (Engelbrecht et al., 2016).

All these developmental learning disabilities affect the academic ability, cognition, and performance of learners and are detrimental to learners in mainstream schooling because they cannot keep up or cope. Hence, addressing these developmental learning disabilities is necessary to accompany the learner progression policy.

2.2. Grade retention vs Grade progression

Grade retention of learners is the practice of keeping behind a grade learner who does not meet the specified academic requirements (Grossen et al., 2017; Jimerson & Renshaw, 2012). Grade retention is believed to assist learners in meeting future grade mandates and performing better academically in the future. The effects of grade retention are both short and long-term. The short-term benefits could be an improvement in academic performance in the first year after grade retention, but this is known to decline in subsequent grades (Jimerson & Renshaw, 2012).

Long-term negative effects may be emotional distress, low self-esteem, and poor relationships with friends leading to depression and substance abuse (Jimerson & Renshaw, 2012). Thus, grade retention can have beneficial effects on learners but as time proceeds, it is found to harm learners (Alexander, Entwisle & Dauber, 2003, as cited by Ramputla 2020).

Learner grade progression, as an alternative to grade retention, encourages the progress or condonation of learners from one grade to the next with envisaged academic support (Ramaputla, 2020). Progression is also known as automatic promotion (Jimerson & Renshaw, 2012) and is believed to lead often to negative

consequences because it frustrates learners who are not effectively supported and find themselves in grades that they cannot cope with (Munje & Maarman, 2016). It can contribute to a further decline in high school results because these progressed learners come out of high school with serious knowledge gaps that make them ineligible to attend tertiary institutions (Ramaputla, 2020).

The literature seems to concur that often learner retention and learner progression can both lead to bigger negative outcomes than positive ones. Retained learners are often found bored (Jimerson & Renshaw, 2012; Ramaputla, 2020) due to a lack of stimulation or drive to learn from the repetition of the curriculum in their second year of the same grade (Okurut, 2015). Progressed learners, often without adequate learner support intervention, are also affected badly because they rarely benefit from adequate support and this causes an increased risk of these learners dropping out of school, or developing behavioural issues like bullying their younger classmates, feeling unworthy and hopeless (Grossen et al., 2017).

This debate underlies the importance of effective policy implementation strategies, whether for learner retention or learner progression. These should include support interventions in schools for these learners. This is why this study hopes to identify the main challenges in implementing the learner progression policy and the kind of support interventions that exist or should exist.

2.3. Unpacking what policy means as discourse and as text.

Developing policies is about setting up guidelines for the future. Due to the uncertainties of the future and the ever-changing world that we are surrounded by policies are devised to give directives. Policies are therefore statements of intention in a text form that are set to reach a specified objective (Forrester & Garratt, 2016). Educational policies refer to principles, structures, and actions that are significantly related to solving educational issues (Trowler, 2003) and development (Bekkers, Fenger & Scholten, 2017). Ball (2015) agrees that policies are processes to reach outcomes, but he argues that one needs to distinguish between ‘policy as text’ and ‘policy as discourse’.

Policy as discourse sets the terrain and frames a form of politics in terms of what can and cannot be said, thought and reacted to (Ball, 1993,). Gasper and Apthorpe

(1996, p. 6) explain that “the discourse presents the policy solution as what ‘inescapably ought to be done’, what ‘stands to reason’, even though, in reality, there are many different solutions to a policy problem”. This means that policies do not tell individuals what to do but they create circumstances and options to decide how to implement policies on the ground through multiple initiatives like workshops, training, and professional learning communities amongst others, and therefore individuals do not change policies.

In contrast, policy as text is a textual matter of language in speech and documentation. The policy as text is influenced by interest groups and developed by negotiations at the political level or through parliamentary processes within the state. Through this textual enactment, policies are worked, reworked, multi-authored, and read through in multiple settings (Ball, 2015). It shows that policies are not fixed but rather ever-changing and contested as policy actors engage with them even if often only certain voices are heard (Ball, 2015).

Hence, Bowe, Ball, and Gold (1992, as cited by Ball, 1993) argue that policy is a discourse with possibilities and impossibilities and is a text that creates circumstances in which different agents, however unequal in terms of their power and authority, contest, mediate or resist the policy. These actors give policy meanings through their different readings and decoding. Policy as text carries opportunities, contradictions, and constraints because differential readings play off different meanings within the state and open spaces for action and responses (Ball, 1993). So, policy is both discourse and text where a complex relationship in policy development and implementation is shared.

2.4. Debates around policy and policy implementation challenges in South African schools

Democracy in South Africa is about the elimination of historical and structural inequalities (Engelbrecht et al., 2016). Educational policies have become a main point for action and discussion (Ramputla, 2020). They provide a framework, or a process utilised to meet educational objectives (Tebele, 2016). Post-1994 educational policies aim to address issues such as the empowerment of citizenry for those who were previously disadvantaged and to redress the many inequalities of

the past that are associated with the socio-cultural, socio-economical, and political factors.

Despite many good education policies aimed at eradicating some of the social ills in the country (Tebele, 2016), these policies are often borrowed from other countries with well-developed, equipped education systems and a strong implementation capacity (Jansen, 2002).

As a result, many of these educational policies are flawed in the way they are formulated because the South African educational context and dynamics on the ground are ignored and do not match up to these other countries and their capacity to implement these policies. Borrowing policies from other countries can potentially improve the quality of education but can also be problematic in other settings (Bayeni & Santimburwa, 2018, as cited by Makhanya, 2021). South Africa seems to give more credence to the development of policies rather than to their implementation which refers to the administrative procedures and implementers' actions needed to achieve policy objectives on the ground.

Researchers (Mogale & Malatji, 2023) highlight that the process of policy implementation often reveals gaps about what the policy intends, leading up to the success or failure of the policy on the ground. The way to understand this gap between policy and policy implementation can be explained differently depending on the adopted conceptual policy approaches or schools of thought. There are three conceptual approaches used to analyse policies: the liberal pluralist, interpretive and political approaches which will be explored in the conceptual framework section (De Clercq, 2010; Fischer, Miller & Sidney, 2017; De Clercq, 2020)

The policy implementation challenges are seen by these conceptual approaches as the result of different factors. The liberal pluralist approach focuses on factors such as poor teacher quality and training, lack of resources, and inadequate implementation strategies (Jansen, 2002) while the interpretive approach focuses on the interaction between the stakeholders (teachers, parents, learners, and school management teams) and whether they work together, are united and committed to implementing as best as they can the policy given their context. The sense-making of the policy in context requires leadership capacity to effectively mediate the policy

implementation process within the local context (De Clercq, 2010). The political approach focuses on the power relationships and dynamics of the various stakeholders to understand why the policy was implemented in the way it was.

2.5. The progression policy and its implementation in South African Schools

The learner progression policy and its implementation in schools are a highly debated topic (Munje & Maarman, 2016). The rationale for the progression policy is to reduce the number of retainers and increase educational equity but also to minimise learner dropouts. Yet, the number of learner dropouts remains high. Being against forcing struggling learners to continuously repeat the grade that they have not passed, the progression policy opens pathways for such learners to advance to the next grade in the hope of creating a culture of learning for these learners (Ramaputla, 2020).

However, it was discovered that progressed learners are not doing well, which contributes to the decline of Grade 12 national results (in 2015 and 2016). This was interpreted as a failure of the progression policy implementation (Mogale & Modipane, 2021). Ruben (2015) explains that, if progressed learners have poorly acquired subject content knowledge from the foundation or intermediate phases, it is unlikely that they will perform well in the senior and FET phases as the lack of knowledge will continue to grow. The FET phase is mentioned here but often it reflects the fact that many of these struggling learners are ill-prepared since the foundation phase.

The DBE wanted to take the learner progression policy one level up at the FET phase. It wanted to assist matriculants who failed grade 12 and had already repeated another grade at the FET phase. This is why it introduced the Multiple Examination Opportunity (MEO) to ensure that these learners would have yet again another opportunity to finish their schooling by being allowed to re-write and split their grade 12 matric examinations into two parts written six months apart from each other (Ngema & Maphalala, 2021).

But even with this opportunity, Mogale & Modipane (2021) argue that there is little guarantee that these grade 12 progressed learners can make up for their underperformance and that they will be academically motivated to benefit from this

opportunity. This DBE attempt at allowing grade 12 progressed learners to have yet another opportunity to re-write and not drop out is another reason for the importance of understanding the problematic issues around the progression policy and its implementation.

Several South African studies (Burger, Van der Berg, and Von Fintel, 2015; Mogale, Malatji & Mphahlele, 2011; Mogale & Modipane, 2021; Munje & Maarman, 2016; Ramputla, 2020 and Stott, et al., 2015) explain that the policy implementation phase is challenging due to many different factors. These include over-aged learners making poor progress in the education system; continuous progression of learners leading to eventual learner dropout (Burger et al., 2015); the overburdening of progressed learners who cannot cope with challenges in the new grades due to learner under-preparedness (Munje & Maarman, 2016); the lack of curriculum support for progressed learners (Mogale, Malatji & Mphahlele (2011); little consultation measures between and with teachers, parents and learners during the progression policy implementation process (Mogale & Modipane, 2021); no clear-cut processes, structures, and strategies in the implementation of policy; poor teacher quality and training (Ramputla, 2020) and limited effective teaching aids or resources (Stott et al., 2015).

Other studies reveal that teacher support to assist progressed learners is limited, because of overcrowded classes, economically disadvantaged situations, lack of parental involvement, difficult situations on the ground, and minimal assistance provided by the district or DBST (Brahmbatt, 2020; Dikgale, 2012; Mogale, Malatji & Mphahlele, 2011).

Hence, the tracking and support for these learners need to be reviewed and made available as they are of utmost significance to improve the policy implementation process (Brahmbhatt, 2020; Mogale & Malatji, 2023). The learner progression policy is likely to succeed in schools where teachers have ample resources and strategies to remediate problems and provide relevant support and opportunities to struggling progressed learners (Westaway, 2019).

2.6. Support interventions to assist retained and progressed learners.

Jimerson and Renshaw (2012) argue that there is no easy answer to effectively addressing the needs of all learners in a classroom but there may be some interventions to curb the retained learners and assist the automatically progressed learners. Both retained and progressed learners differ from their counterparts (Muedi, Kutame, Ngidi, and Uleanya, 2021) and so do primary school and secondary school learners.

Some international studies focus on primary school interventions in India (Chowdhury, 2018) and in the Netherlands (Beekman, Brinke & Boshuizen, 2021) which include remedial education and counselling, extracurriculars, constant innovation, and formative assessments to assist academically struggling learners. Chowdhury (2018) explains that remedial education encompasses a remedial program run by teachers and volunteers who understand the context and abilities of these learners and include counselling (Chowdhury, 2018).

Learners are then academically assisted by creatively teaching and building on their foundational knowledge. Learners from difficult backgrounds and home situations are also assisted through a coping mechanism led by counsellors and psychologists who are on call and available to assist these learners. Significantly, these learners have a special period allocated to ‘life skills’ whereby they engage with their class teacher in discussion on topics that affect them emotionally or any topic they feel comfortable talking about. Through these remedial and counselling sessions, learners feel a sense of belonging such that the help they receive gives them some strength to overcome their difficulties, be it from an emotional stance or any other problem (Chowdhury, 2018).

Successful extra-curricular activities involve strengthening and complementing the academic interventions in class (Chowdhury, 2018). Extra-curricular activities such as sports, art, music, and theatre help these learners build their self-esteem, time management, and self-discipline in pursuing other activities other than academics. These are crucial skills developed by academically struggling learners who do not have positive role models found within the household environment and must fend for themselves or head their homes, as revealed by this study (Chowdhury, 2018).

Constant innovation in assisting struggling learners involves two methods known as the buddy system and the friendship bench (Chowdhury, 2018). The buddy system, also known as collaborative learning, is when struggling primary learners team up with their senior counterparts (grades 9 and 10 students) who teach these primary school-going learners some subject content and concepts in mathematics and science. The friendship bench, on the other hand, involves any child feeling low or depressed who just needs to sit on the bench to signal to others that he or she is looking to talk to someone. In this sense, any teacher or learner can approach the child sitting on the bench to help him or her cope with stresses from the home, depression, or any other pressures they may feel hinder their ability to concentrate at school (Chowdhury, 2018).

Beekman, Brinke & Boshuizen (2021) argue that formative assessments of secondary school learners, or a process of getting learners to develop strategies for their learning and self-regulation act as continuous learner support which could also be a means of intervention support by the teacher to give feedback about learners learning. In addition, another form of intervention for learners with barriers is to apply for special concessions, whereby scribes or readers and large printouts of assessments amongst others are made to prevent the learner from giving a misinterpreted account of his or her knowledge or competence in a subject (August, 2018).

Other studies focus on secondary schools' interventions. Naholo's (2020) research in Namibia mentions that barriers to learning could be alleviated by the teacher applying classroom management techniques to effectively get learners constantly and thoroughly involved in lessons. These techniques can include organising the classroom layout for maximum learning potential, cultivating good attitudes of learners by giving good instructions, using group work for peer assistance, setting time limits to complete tasks in class, and giving timely feedback after every activity (Naholo, 2020). Another technique argued by Stein (2017) is co-teaching whereby a teacher is partnered with another specialist teacher to share the duties of planning, instructing, and assessing.

Differentiated and individualised teaching is another widely cited approach to resolving the learning barriers of learners (Limbu, 2012). Differentiated teaching is

when teachers reach out and use varied teaching methods such as the modification of curricula, teaching methods learner resources, and learner activities which must be aligned to their incumbent circumstances to meet learners' learning preferences, needs, and intellectual capabilities. Individualised teaching on the other hand is when the teacher plans and delivers lessons to accommodate the uniqueness of learners to maximise their potential success (Limbu, 2012). In the case of this research study, individualised teaching is perceived as a difficult teaching strategy because of the large learner numbers per classroom. Teacher participants mentioned that they would like teacher assistants to help them with struggling learners.

Overall, the support can take the form of classroom-, school-, district-, and/or community/parent-specific interventions. Classroom-based interventions work well if teachers attend empowering workshops to understand struggling learners so that they do not progress (or retain) learners based on subjectivity and emotional decisions. This means that workshops or training sessions need to train teachers on differentiated teaching methods, interventions, or strategies to tackle diverse learning barriers in the classroom. Teachers must realise that learners are different in the way they learn and that different intervention measures need to be implemented to assist learners at their different cognitive levels once these learners have been identified.

Furthermore, grade-specific intervention meetings ought to be held with teachers, parents, SMT (School Management Teams) or the SBST (School Based Support Team), and learners to inform all parties about the intervention strategies needed to be applied to assist learners that are at risk of failing (Kader, 2012). This is a means of informing everyone involved about struggling learners and ensuring that the necessary measures are taken to assist learners at risk of failing. For instance, parents are informed that they need to assist their children with learning at home after school whilst teachers develop new differentiated pedagogical approaches for different struggling learners.

Hence, both teachers and parents need to work in collaboration to assist struggling learners whilst the management teams (SMT and SBST) monitor the process. However, these classroom-based interventions must remember, as Stott, et al. (2015) argue, that South African progressed learners are often unwilling to follow

intervention programmes because they feel demotivated and believe that they will pass to the next grade regardless of their academic performance.

School-based interventions include the early identification of learners at risk of failure or with academic struggles from as early as the beginning of each grade. This is so that the struggling learners can receive early remedial work, support, and monitoring by their teacher. School-based support classes can also include extended study into holidays or weekends with the assistance of learner support teams and one-on-one tutoring sessions (Jimerson & Renshaw, 2012).

Interventions can also come from the district. As the Minister of Education, Angie Motshekga, explained, there is a need to strengthen support programs for progressed learners (Ramputla, 2020) with educational psychologists at the district level as the latter can play a role in assisting with support programs by supporting teachers who have many learners with learning barriers (Sidat, 2018).

The provincial departments of education are not proactive enough in encouraging and assisting with learner support programmes. The only exception is the Secondary School Improvement Programmes run by some provinces for grade 12 learners on Saturday, ‘the sixth school day’. The programme focuses on examination questions and on how to achieve maximum results in key areas of the curriculum as well as on homework. It also develops and uses tutor and learner support materials.

Community-based interventions involve frequent communications between the school and community members/parents about the goals and achievements of learners. Community aftercare facilities and rehabilitation centres, like in drug-stricken areas, can also assist learners with learning barriers as well as learners who need to learn about safety precautions in the community, nutrition, psycho-social support, catch-up, and after-school homework support programmes when parents are unavailable (Bialobrzeska, Randell & Winkler, 2012). These can aid academic opportunities and uplift the social and emotional skills of learners who suffer academically and emotionally. Parents should also be taught how to assist their children at home which should constitute a safe place for learners who can unpack their emotions and prepare their assigned homework (Kader, 2012; Deakin, Deluca, Evans, Hayward, Jones, Larsen-Evjen & Wyatt-Smith, 2020).

Even though the literature is clear about the need to develop interventions at various levels to assist progressed learners, this is not often what happens in reality. A study conducted by Muedi et al. (2021) highlights problems in the implementation of intervention plans. It was found that, despite teachers attending workshops to assist progressed learners, to monitor them through assessments and various other strategies like in-school training on how to identify progressed learners and support struggling progressed learners, teachers remained reluctant to develop and implement academic performance improvement plans, use their homework period timetables, and moderate learners via peer assessments (Muedi et al., 2021).

The reason for the above-mentioned reluctance by teachers is firstly because lesson delivery to progressed learners is difficult to do due to lack of training and the lack of initiative by the DBE to capacitate teachers with these necessary skills. Majorly, the teachers feel that the policy is imposed on them, (even if they are putting in extra effort by providing interventions after hours) whilst they are not compensated by the DBE in the form of financial incentives (Muedi et al., 2021).

In that sense, support plans and programmes are not sufficient, they have to be consistently implemented by the school and committed teachers. This is the only way in which the progression policy will succeed as it does in countries that remediate problems and provide struggling learners with effective opportunities and assistance to catch up with their better-performing peers (Westaway, 2019).

2.7. Conceptual/Theoretical Framework

This study is about the teaching staff and principal's views on the learner progression policy and its implementation challenges as well as the ways intervention programmes do or could assist. A conceptual/theoretical framework is the blueprint needed to inform how the collected data ought to be analysed (Grant & Osanloo, 2014).

There are three major theoretical approaches to the analysis of policies and the gap between policy and policy implementation. The liberal pluralist approach argues that policymakers should control better the policy implementers (a top-to-bottom policy model) (De Clercq, 2020), the interpretive approach understands policy as a process involving negotiation and mediation by all stakeholders at the different levels of the

process and the political approach analyses policy as a manifestation of upholding power, and authority which promotes what the dominant interest groups want during the policy process (De Clercq, 2020).

The liberal pluralist approach (Deem & Brehony, 2004) views policy in a normative manner. Drawing from Pülzl and Treib (2017), the top-down approach to policy and its implementation approach follows the rational view that policies are rational, prescriptions are developed by policymakers or senior bureaucrats who organise and should be in control of the implementing agents. If a gap develops between the intentions of the policy and its outcomes on the ground, it means that the senior bureaucrats must tighten their control over the implementing agents who are understood to not follow properly their mandates.

In the case of the progression policy implementation, the factors responsible for the gap, according to this approach, include teachers facing a too-demanding curriculum and overcrowded classes, inadequate school resources, poorly monitored teachers, and the failure of the SBST and DBST to monitor, support teachers as well as make them accountable.

The shortcoming of this top-down approach is that it disregards or condemns the relative autonomy of the policy implementers on the ground and does not consider that contextual factors, such as inadequate teacher skills, multiple teaching obligations, lack of resources, poor communication amongst stakeholders (De Clercq, 2010; Ossenbrink, Finnsson, Bening & Hoffmann, 2018) (as cited by Makhanya, 2021) and other factors, contribute inevitably to the policy not being implemented in a standardized manner in all contexts.

The second approach, the interpretive approach, is linked to post-structuralism (Deem & Brehony, 2004). It argues that policy formulation and implementation are not separate phenomena but part of a continuous process. In essence, an interpretive approach to policy analysis focuses on the meanings of policies, values, feelings, and beliefs on the processes by which meanings of policies are read and communicated by audiences for action. It contends that the policy process is socially constructed for meaning making and therefore it rejects the idea that policy is developed by the policy makers or the ministry and imposed onto the implementers

and targets of the policy so that they have to strictly follow the policy mandates. The gap between the policy and its implementation according to the interpretive approach, varies according to the context and the various implementation capacities and strategies developed by the various implementers (Mogale & Malatji 2023). In the case of this study from an interpretive point of view, the progression of policy implementation focuses on different factors responsible for the gap between policy and its implementation. This is why this study researches the understanding of teachers' and SBST's views, perceptions, and responses to implementing the policy in their respective contexts as well as their capabilities to policy implementation based on teacher workloads, availability and access to resources and the ability of stakeholders in successful policy implementation.

It recognises that centralised policies are made at the top level, but there is inevitably some local autonomy and concerns among the implementers who can contribute to the policy process through mutually acceptable bargaining and adaptation in the policy implementation process. Policy implementers have to consider the context they are in, to be able to seek clarification, mediate, and raise concerns about the policies in consultation with other stakeholders so that common ground can be found for the policy implementation.

Thus, policy implementers on the ground inevitably adapt the policy while implementing it within their respective contexts (De Clercq, 2010). The conceptual shortcoming of this approach is that policy enactors can "overuse their discretion and autonomy when interpreting and implementing the policy" (Pülzl & Treib, 2017, p.95) in specific contexts and deviate significantly from the policy intent.

In the case of the progression policy implementation, the factors responsible for the gap, according to this approach, should be researched by understanding teachers' and SBST's views, perceptions, and responses to implementing the policy in their context.

Lastly, the political approach to policy implementation from a Marxist perspective (Deem & Brehony, 2004) goes further than the interpretive approach. This approach emphasises that the policy process is a politically contested one, based on power dynamics between different interest groups such as various capitalists, the state, and

civil society organisations. Human agency is underplayed in this regard as policies are often analysed as preserving the status quo and promoting the interests of the dominant political groups rather than the interests of the disadvantaged communities. According to the political approach, the educational system favours the rich and elite and is biased against the poor and the working class, and this explains why the poor remain poor whilst the rich become richer through their better educational access and outcomes, better access to educational structures, resources, and better quality of skills of teachers, principals, and heads of departments to name a few (De Clercq, 2010). All these factors are fundamental obstacles to reducing educational disparities and keeping the poor disadvantaged and the elite rich. The shortcoming of this approach is that even if the policy is based on power dynamics and is mediated or accepted, in its implementation by those in power, it is also often contested by any emerging social movement (De Clercq, 2010).

Thus, the political approach does not argue that it is only school factors that hinder policy implementation (under-skilled teachers, inadequate educational resources, etc) but it goes beyond this and looks into societal family conditions (poverty, unemployment, lack of parental guidance, child-headed homes, insufficient household income, substance abuse) as these reproduce underperforming disadvantaged learners who continue to fail because they are badly affected by the learner progression policy implementation. As such this approach considers factors found at the meso, macro, and micro levels.

The conceptualisation and analysis of the policy process and the gap between policy and policy implementation varies depending on which schools of thought (liberal, interpretive, or political approaches) are used. This research is informed by the interpretive approach which will be used to analyse the empirical data as perceived by some school implementers of the progression policy as it happens in their natural setting of work which aids their understanding of learner's barriers to learning, their knowledge gaps and how they view, respond, support, or resist the policy in their context. Further to this, through this approach, the study hopes to understand the views and meaning-making process of the main implementers of the progression

policy as well as unpack their contributions to the successful or unsuccessful policy implementation strategies (Werts & Brewer, 2015).

This explains why this study asks participants about their perceptions and interpretations of the learner progression policy, and how they adapt and mediate it to their circumstances within their specific schooling contexts. It is also aware that the intentions of the progression policy can be defeated if there are no effective interventions and support mechanisms at the level of the teacher, school, or district (Mogale & Malatji, 2023).

Chapter two covers the literature review which leads to the identification of the contributory factors to learners' learning barriers and dropout and the debates around retention vs progression. After unpacking the meaning of policy and policy implementation, it examines the learner progression policy, its implementation challenges, and intervention strategies needed to assist progressed learners. This leads to the development of a conceptual framework that is used to analyse the collected data.

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Chapter three outlines the process by which the research study was conducted by focusing on the research paradigm, research design, sample, data collection and analysis, ethical issues as well as issues of validity and reliability.

3.1. Research Paradigm

A research paradigm can be defined as "a way of seeing the world that frames a research topic" (Kamal, 2019, p.1388) which has an impact on how individuals think and believe. For this study, the interpretive research paradigm is used, which refers to understanding how people make sense of their environments. Their opinions and beliefs are subjective, and they interpret and give meaning to the phenomena they experience (Amineh & Asl, 2015; Ebrahim, 2018). Interpretive research takes place within a natural setting where the participants make their living (Ramputla, 2020). Thus, the study gathers various clarifications, opinions, beliefs, and subjective meaning-making of a single phenomenon, in this case, the implementation of the learner progression policy, from the direct experiences of different participants.

3.2. Research Design

A qualitative research method approach is utilised as it is a good fit given our intention to understand the perceptions and experiences of the chosen participants to answer questions on the progression policy (Ebrahim, 2018). A descriptive case study method is chosen for this qualitative study because this method allows the acquisition of knowledge through the incisive exploration of phenomena from a small sample population (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014; Ramputla, 2020; Rashid, Rashid, Warraich, Sabir & Waseem, 2019). Further to this, a descriptive case study design found in qualitative research engages the researcher in inquiry about in-depth insights and analysis of issues within varied contexts (Creswell, 2013; McMillan & Schumacher, 2014) which is therefore linked to this study.

3.3. Research Methods

3.3.1. Sample Population

Two schools of different quintiles are selected as samples. The participants in this study are from a secondary school (School A) with Grade 9 as the last year of the senior phase and a primary school (School B) focusing on Grade 7 as it is the first year of the senior phase. School A is a quintile 2 school located in the West of Johannesburg whereas School B is a quintile 4 school located in the North of Johannesburg. The sample is purposeful and targets “key informants in the field who can help in identifying information-rich cases” (Harsh, 2011, p. 4, as cited by Shaheen, Pradhan & Ranajee, 2019).

In South Africa, quintile two and three schools are non-fee-paying schools while quintile 4 schools can charge fees. In our sample, however, the quintile 2 school which is a non-fee-paying school is well-equipped with smartboards and the latest technological teaching and learning aids that receive a lot more funding from the government. In contrast, the selected quintile four schools, which only charge R350 per year, do not have such technological resources not because the department had not provided these resources to this school, but simply because they provided technological devices that have either been misused, vandalised or stolen. This is substantiated by the ills of society surrounding this quintile four schools, whereby

violence, gangsterism, and thievery are so openly practiced. Also, this school has a dysfunctional library with an absent librarian most of the year due to health issues.

It is a purposive sample as rich information is expected to be drawn from these two schools by weighing out if the better-equipped and funded quintile two – the secondary school would have better progression policy implementation and intervention strategies in place compared to the less funded or resourceful quintile four primary schools. One would assume that the better-funded quintile two-secondary school would have better interventions and implementation mechanisms in place thereof.

Data is gathered from the two principals, four HODs, and six educators, or a total of 12 participants. Each participant plays a different role in the management and implementation of the learner progression policy. For instance, teachers conduct the intervention in class, after diagnosing learners' barriers to learning, whilst the HODs oversee that support and interventions are done, and the principals give feedback to the district about the support given to struggling learners. The selected number of participants are supposed to contribute to quality knowledge, interpretations, and reflections about the learner progression policy and its implementation challenges.

3.3.2. Data Collection

The study uses semi-structured open-ended interview questions. This use of interview questions within the interpretivism paradigm does not narrow the research study findings to finite questions which are often found within the constructs of quantitative research design with surveys and questionnaires. Answering open-ended questions probes detailed nuanced data in reflection of the policy (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). Semi-structured interviews comprise core questions that outline what needs to be investigated which can be rephrased whilst the interview is in session. It is hoped that the questions allow participants to express their opinions (Nengwekhulu, 2021).

This study explores the teaching staff and principal's views about the learner progression policy, its policy implementation challenges, and suggestions on how to alleviate these challenges. The interviews aim to target the themes associated with the research questions. These include teachers' and principals' understanding and

attitudes towards learners with learning barriers; teachers' and principals' views about the aim and rationale of the progression policy; the policy implementation challenges faced by teachers, HODs, and principals as well as the forms of responses and support given to teachers to support the progressed learners.

The second data collection source was document analysis. Document analysis is an analytical method in qualitative research that requires data or documents to be examined, evaluated, and interpreted for understanding and empirical knowledge (Bowen, 2009). In this case, documents were only collected from school B. The documents collected and analysed include improvement plans (individual learner support plans), SNA documents (SNA 1, 2, and 3), reports made by teachers, school-based support teams who are the HODs, and district reports (when the district officials visit the school) about interventions in place at the school as it is interesting to follow policy implementation and the paper trail of interviews conducted and any other information and reports sent upward (Bowen, 2009; Ramaputla, 2020; Wach & Ward, 2013).

3.3.3. Data Analysis

Data analysis begins when the researcher interacts with participants during the data collection process by skilfully facilitating discussions (Rabiee, 2004). When data is analysed, it is interpreted by the researcher to structure, order, and draw meaningful conclusions from the data collection. In this qualitative study, the thematic data analysis approach is used to categorise the data. Braun and Clarke (2016), call this thematic analysis. By using the process of thematic analysis, Creswell's steps to data analysis were conducted which involved 1. Collecting and familiarizing oneself with data, 2. Transcribing, 3. Generating codes, 4. Generating themes, 5. Categorising and interpreting data into themes and sub-themes and 6. Presenting data in a structured way (Creswell, 2013).

Therefore, data was analysed by collecting data, familiarising myself with and re-reading data recorded in my journal, and then listening to audio recordings of interviews. Thereafter, verbatim transcriptions took place which led to code generation whereby recurring data or data that related to each other were slotted under themes and sub-themes which ensured the provision of rich descriptions and

information about the implementation of the learner progression policy and the intervention strategies used to assist struggling learners in both selected schools. Data was then presented as a final research report with evidence collected, use of pseudonyms for confidentiality purposes, and processed through the research process (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014).

3.4. Limitations of the study

The initial plan of the study was to conduct interviews towards the end of the second school term for participants to be free and unaffected by their workloads. However, when actioning the plan, it was found out that school A's participants were very busy and struggled to participate in the interviews. This was due to the learners being sent home after examinations, teachers invigilating examinations, and marking loads of examination scripts. This delayed and affected the keeping up with the schedule of conducting interviews.

Therefore, this meant going back and forth to the school with the researcher having often to postpone and reschedule interviews. This increased the load of the researcher because of the distance between the selected schools and her workplace location. In the end, the researcher interviewed more participants in School B than in School A because School A's participants were not easily available compared to the others. Therefore, whilst the Principal and HOD participant numbers were the same for both schools (1 principal and 2 HODs per school), unfortunately, due to the lack of participant availability in school A, only 2 teachers were interviewed compared to 4 teachers in school B.

Travel time and distance between the researcher's place of work and school A

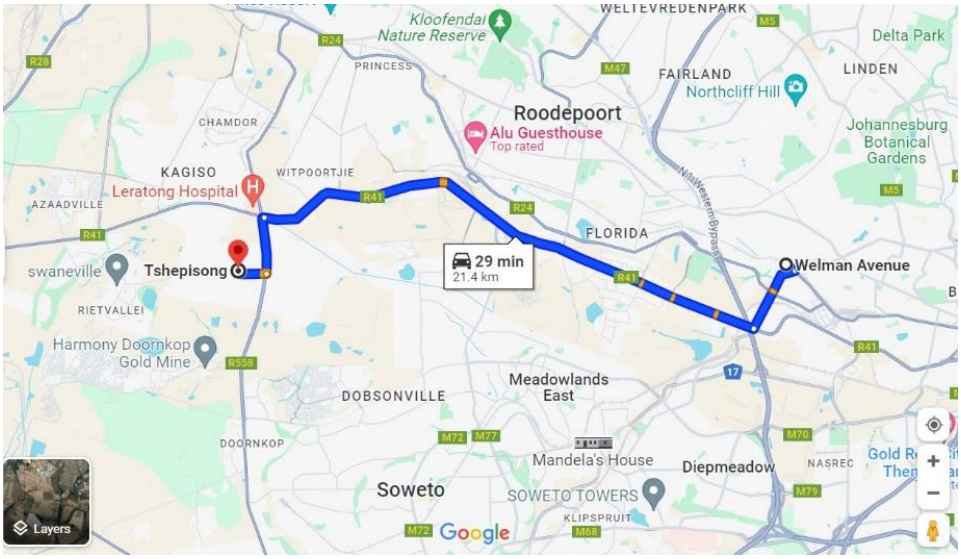


Figure 1: https://www.google.com/maps/dir/Welman+Ave,+Newclare,+Randburg,+2093/Tshepisong,+Soweto/@-26.1855074,27.8032359,12z/data=!3m1!4b1!4m14!4m13!1m5!1m1!1s0x1e950a4bf700273b:0x7d868967e809d3a1!2m2!1d27.9667253!2d-26.1880178!1m5!1m1!1s0x1e95a245aad56a4f:0x110978c8fd225053!2m2!1d27.8018337!2d-26.1897784!3e0?entry=ttu *(accessed: 13 January 2024)*

Travel time and distance between the researcher's place of work and school B

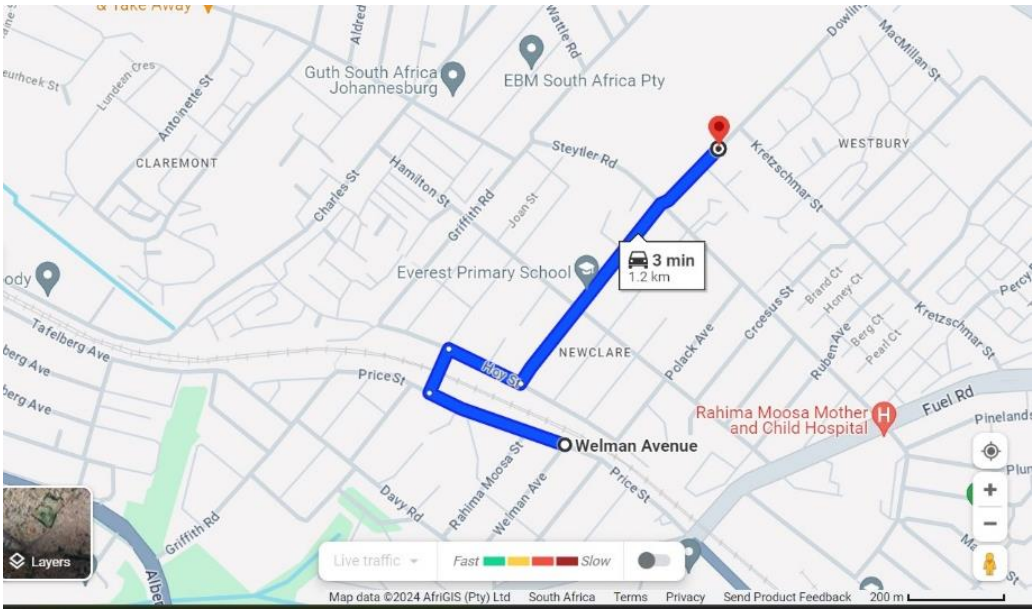


Figure 2: https://www.google.com/maps/dir/Welman+Ave,+Newclare,+Randburg,+2093/Dowling+Ave,+Westbury,+Johannesburg/@-26.1847334,27.960195,15z/am=t/data=!4m14!4m13!1m5!1m1!1s0x1e950a4bf700273b:0x7d868967e809d3a1!2m2!1d27.9667253!2d-26.1880178!1m5!1m1!1s0x1e950a4d69676b8f:0x81ddb4db60a5e285!2m2!1d27.969947!2d-26.1824411!3e0?entry=ttu *(accessed: 13 January 2024)*

3.5 Ethical Issues

In a research study, it is important to act responsibly and ensure that ethical values are practised. This was done by applying to the Gauteng Department of Education (GDE) for permission to conduct the research. The University of the Witwatersrand's ethics committee was also approached and the Wits protocol number for the ethics clearance certificate is 2023ECE016. Once these permissions were granted, I gained permission from the principals of the two schools and then from all the participants whom I asked to sign a consent form. The participants were informed about identity anonymity and confidentiality.

Consent was sought by the researcher from participants to be recorded for transcribing purposes and they were told they may withdraw from any interview sessions at any given time if they felt uncomfortable. Any data provided by the participants was stored in a safe place and will be destroyed within five years from the date of data collection.

3.6. Issues of Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is of paramount importance in ensuring quality research (Loh, 2013). Validity, reliability, and generalisability are criteria for the truthfulness or trustworthiness of research (Loh, 2013).

Validity is defined as determining the instruments that are appropriate for adding valid data to answer the research questions at hand (Leung, 2015). In the case of this study, I drew what I believe is appropriate and valid data from the literature, responses from my participants and relevant documents around the explicit themes of my study.

Reliability is the consistency by which results may be obtained (Andrade, 2018). In this case, the interviewer was as objective and professional as could be and the interview questions were posed and designed to encourage participants to answer questions truthfully. It is believed that the participants' answers were reliable enough to use as they reflect their realities within their contexts.

Generalisability is understood as participants' contributions that are applicable and relevant beyond the boundaries from where the information is being gathered (Osbeck & Antczak, 2021). Therefore, the answers provided by participants are trusted, applicable and truthful at the time of receipt and are not manipulated in any instance to suit the researcher or the participant. However, a small case study of two schools is not generalisable and can at most reveal trends.

3.7. Conclusion

Chapter three outlined the way the study is designed, executed, and completed. It explains the research paradigm, research design, research methodology, limitations, issues of ethical and trustworthiness, reliability, validity, and generalisability.

The next chapter presents the data collected and an analysis of the findings of the research conducted as fieldwork in the two selected schools. The presentation involves participants' opinions and viewpoints about the learner progression policy, its challenges, and the way forward.

CHAPTER FOUR: ANALYSIS AND DATA PRESENTATION

This chapter presents and discusses the data collected through semi-structured interviews. The targeted participants and their profiles are mentioned below.

4.1. Profile of school and participants

DETAILS	SCHOOL A (Secondary or High School)	SCHOOL B (Primary School)
LOCATION	Johannesburg West	Johannesburg North
QUINTILE	2	4
ENROLMENT NUMBER OF LEARNERS IN 2023	1505	1166
TEACHER NUMBERS	47	32
FEE-PAYING	NO	Subject to affordability by parent/guardian, a minimum of R350 per year is to be paid

POPULATION GROUP	Black African	Black African/Coloured
SCHOOL INFRASTRUCTURE	Faced bricked buildings, a smart school with smartboards and computers.	A newly built school with faced bricked buildings with poor leadership. A school labelled as a smart school with smartboards and computers, However, such resources are often inaccessible or available due to theft by poor residents of the community, they are also vandalised or not functioning.

4.2. Targeted participants

The participants in this study are from two selected schools, a primary school A with Grade 7 being the first year of the senior phase and a secondary school B with Grade 9 being the last year of the senior phase. School A is a quintile 2 school located in the West of Johannesburg whereas school B is a quintile 4 school located in the North of Johannesburg. Data is gathered from 2 principals, 4 HODs, and 6 Educators or a total of 12 participants.

4.3. Coding of Participants

SCHOOL A PARTICIPANTS	**CODE**	**SCHOOL B PARTICIPANTS**	**CODE**
Teacher 1	T1A	Teacher 3	T3B
Teacher 2	T2A	Teacher 4	T4B
Head of department 1	HOD1A	Teacher 5	T5B
Head of department 2	HOD2A	Teacher 6	T6B
Principal	P1A	Head of department 3	HOD3B
		Head of department 4	HOD4B
		Principal 2	P2B

4.3.1. School A participants

School A's participants are referred to as Teachers 1 and 2 (T1A, T2A), Head of Departments 1 and 2 as HOD 1A, HOD 2A, and Principal as P1A, or 5 participants.

T1A has been a teacher for 20 years teaching English Home Language and Technology. T2A has been a teacher for 2 years teaching English and Life Orientation (LO) as core subjects. HOD 1A oversees the English Department and has been in the teaching field for 26 years. HOD2A has been acting as a HOD for the Sports, Technology and Science departments. The principal (P1A) is a newly appointed female since the middle of 2023 who has also been striving to provide learners with the best possible education.

4.3.2. School B participants

Participants for School B are referred to as Teachers 3,4,5 and 6 (T3B, T4B, T5B, T6B), Head of Departments 3 and 4 as HOD 3B and HOD 4B, and Principal as P2B or a total of 7 participants.

T3B has been currently teaching for 5 years in the following subjects, Economics and Management Sciences (EMS), Creative Arts (CA), and Natural Sciences and Technology.

T4B has been a teacher for 31 years who has taught all subjects however is focused on teaching Mathematics and EMS. T5B has been teaching for 19 years teaching English and Natural Sciences as core subjects. T6B has been an educator for 32 years teaching Afrikaans as a First Additional Language (FAL) and Life Orientation. HOD3B has not only the Head of the department of grade 7 for the past 6 years but also a teacher for 25 years, teaching English, Social Sciences, Natural Sciences, and Technology. HOD4B has been an HOD for the past 5 years and teaches Creative Arts, Economics, and Management Sciences as well as Natural Sciences and Technology. Lastly, P2B is a male, who has been a principal for the past 6 years, who also teaches learners Social Sciences.

What follows hereafter is the presentation of data according to the chosen themes. For evidence and discussion purposes, the usage of some verbatim quotations is used to answer the key questions surrounding the following sub-research questions:

a. What are the teaching staff and principal's understanding of the causes of learners' learning barriers?
b. What are the teaching staff and principals' views about the aim and rationale of the learner progression policy?
c. What are the implementation challenges encountered by the teaching staff in their classroom regarding learner progression?
d. What forms of response and support do teachers use and need to support the struggling learners?
e. How do SBST and the district support team (DSBT) follow up and monitor learners with learning barriers and does the teaching staff think it is assisting them?

4.4. Theme one: Teaching staff and principal's understanding of the causes of learners' learning barriers.

The first theme that emerged was participants' understanding of the causes behind learners' learning barriers. This theme begins with the factors influencing repetition and learner progression and then the alleviating factors that influence learner repetition and progression.

Factors influencing learners' learning barriers.

The findings indicate that learner barriers majorly stem from broader socioeconomic factors such as substance (alcohol and drugs) abuse, unemployment, child-headed homes, community violence, internal and external school factors like teacher commitment, infrastructure, and resources among others, social and emotional factors and parental factors given the poor parent-to-learner, parent to school relationships and under-educated parents (who are dropouts themselves) resulting in many learners having language and learning barriers. Not all the participants responded to each factor influencing learners' retention and progression, hence the responses under each factor are reported below.

4.4.1. Socio-Economic Factors

Learning does not occur within a vacuum and is not reduced to the school's boundaries. The socio-economic background of any learner plays a pivotal role in the child's learning, and so does parental involvement and education as a whole (Bojuwoye, Moletsane, Stofile, Moolla & Sylvester, 2014). Below I explain what the participants mentioned about socioeconomic factors and the role they play in learner performance.

School A

T2A is one of two main participants of school A who explained,

> *"Society negatively contributes to learners, as they are often distracted when there are societal events like community parties, therefore hindering their concentration at school".*

HOD2A added that there are other factors like drug abuse, alcoholism, and gangsterism which heavily impact learners' learning abilities.

School B

T5B said that:

> *"Socio-economic issues are of major concern. Learners model what they see in their households and in the community to fit in. Substance and alcohol abuse tend to be on the rise at the school level because of socio-economic factors and this makes it difficult for learners to learn adequately or even attend school regularly. Learners also drop out due to socio-economic pressures of making money, they end up begging on the streets to put food on the table" (extrinsic factors).*

HOD3B and HOD4B agreed with T5B who said that factors like drug abuse, alcoholism, and gangsterism impact a learner's ability to perform well at school. Moreover, learners with barriers often come from poverty-stricken homes where the child had to take up responsibilities and where the child was the head of the home. This makes it difficult to teach such learners. As per my experience as a teacher, I

often find that such learners within a classroom situation, try to display an authoritarian kind of character whereby the learner often feels that he or she has more authority over the teacher as well as the other learners as possibly acted out in his or her household-like situation.

Both schools' participants agreed that alcohol, drug abuse, and gangsterism are socio-economic factors that play a major role in hindering learners' abilities to perform well at school. T5B added an interesting point about the act of learners; 'begging'. What has recently been witnessed personally is that there is an influx of children who consider begging as a norm or as a 'job' during the "school" and holiday periods and who 'save' the money obtained to not only sustain their families but also as a means of sustenance for themselves in terms of paying for school fees, books, and uniforms. However, this attributive of 'begging' has a detrimental effect on learners in the long run as it keeps them out of school and limits their ability to academically perform.

4.4.2. School Factors

This section seeks to identify and explain the factors that cause learner barriers to learning, those within or external to the school. The factors within the school are identified as and are not limited to, overcrowding of classrooms, lack of learner effort, and school learning materials and resources. The identified factors external to the school are governmental policy guidelines and achievement requirements.

School A

T2A agreed that,

> *"Overcrowding of classes demotivates teachers at the end".*

HOD2A explained that,

> *"Learners know that they will be promoted without putting in much effort".*

School B

T4B explained that,

> *"Learner textbooks and resources for teaching are of a poor quality; textbooks are provided to learners, they do not return it or, even if they do, they are vandalised, making it difficult for the next grade of learners to use".*

T6B went on to explain that learners do not want to display effort in their academic performance because,

> *"There are factors from the powers that be for kids to be passed along to the next grades irrespective of understanding the work, which is due to the learner progression policy".*

HOD3B exclaimed,

> *"Overcrowded classes make it difficult for educators to give their full attention to intervening into progressed learners' academic life, also there is an overload of work given to educators thus educators find themselves giving attention to those that work well academically".*

Both school A and school B participants agreed that overcrowding of classes can hinder learners' learning. Having an overcrowded classroom imparts a poor quality of education. In my personal experience, the teacher not only deviates attention from teaching but also has to deal with discipline issues as well as environmental conditions like that of old school buildings made out of asbestos and keeping the classroom ventilated enough for learners to adequately breathe, listen, and then learn, making it a tedious job for teachers to teach well.

'Vandalised' or poor textbook conditions hinder learning in the classroom. The teacher must stop teaching when a learner raises his or her hand to note that a page from the textbook is missing or that the homework could not be completed because half the page from the textbook had been torn out. These are circumstances that I, as a teacher, had to face on numerous occasions, and with the copyright restrictions or resource budget constraints by the government not all teachers can ask for the re-purchase of textbooks.

Some educational policies are additional (external) factors that impact the schools and their learners.

HOD4B stressed that,

> *"Low pass requirements are an issue for academic performance, as there are low standards of achievement set by the GDE, hence learners are not motivated to achieve high grades due to this".*

T4B agreed and added,

> *"Language barriers affect learner performance, even though learners struggle to read and write, they still progress as the DBE does not make them fail or learners feel that, even if they do not work, they will still be pushed into the next grade".*

Additionally, participants of both schools found that, due to the progression policy, some learners come to understand that, if they previously failed in the phase, they would progress despite the lack of effort they put in. This is a disheartening fact as such learners know how to play the education system. However, these learners do not realise that they are setting themselves up for trouble and failure because, once they reach grade 12, they can no longer progress as they must prove their academic competencies to earn a matriculation certificate. Hence, in the end, it is not the teacher or the government that they are deceiving but themselves.

4.4.3. Social and Emotional Factors

Social and emotional factors were identified as causing learning barriers with some learners. The following factors were identified under this theme: uncommitted and demotivated learners, peer pressure leading to the emotional breakdown of learners, traumatisation, lack of learner confidence to work well academically, social or psychological abuse coming from the home environment or the community as well as the progression policy which sometimes resulted in over-aged demotivated progressed learners.

School A

It was explained that learners often become emotional and demotivated when they receive poor results at the end of the term. However, the reason for this, according to T1A, is due to,

> *"Lack of commitment by learners, lack of their knowledge from the foundation phase, therefore, they cannot adequately read and write".*

T2A agreed,

> *"Peer pressure and progression often strain learner commitment which therefore does not allow the learner to adjust to the new grade. I had a learner who was progressing, due to the teasing and shame the learner received led to the learner becoming angry over time. The learner eventually did not return to the school".*

P1A explained the learners' factors more widely,

> *"Traumatised learners due to the senseless shootings in the community cause learner underachievement. It is therefore difficult to teach traumatised withdrawn learners and hence educators become dis-illusioned".*

School B

T3B mentioned that,

> *"Many learners lack the confidence to work well academically due to the learning barriers they have. Sitting in a class with learners who are excelling demotivates them and creates the stigma that they must give up and this leads to continuous progression and eventually dropout".*

HOD3B agreed with T3B about learners losing confidence in themselves when they do not perform well academically.

P2B explained more broadly these personal learner factors,

> *"Emotional factors from learners being psychologically abused at home, child molestation or being raped by a family member or acquaintance as an adolescent plays a major role in poor learner grades and repetition. It creates that stigma that these learners do not belong at school or that they should remain at home due to the embarrassment that they carry around with them".*

From the responses above, school A participants felt that the lack of learner motivation, peer pressure, and trauma are major factors behind learning barriers whilst school B's participants cited more the lack of learner confidence, older learners causing class disruptions and abuse hindering learning abilities.

T6B went further when he referred to the impact of the progression policy itself,

> *"Older learners who are progressed influence negatively other learners in the class to cause disruptions, therefore making teaching difficult for the teacher and learning difficult for those that want to work. These learners don't want to be involved in intervention classes; they deliberately behave badly so that they can be put out of the class to be sent to the principal's office instead of focusing on their work". Such learners negatively influence other learners, causing a lot of frustration which may lead to teachers getting into trouble for acts that they do not want to practice, like corporal punishment".*

Finally, both schools perceive that societal issues create a lot of negative emotions in these learners. This is because societal ills often lead to emotional challenges within these learners, and this hinders their ability to focus and perform well academically.

4.4.4. Parental Factors

Parents themselves need to be motivated and constructively involved in their child or children's education. Parental involvement is defined as "the active participation of parents in all aspects of their children's social, emotional, and academic development" (Castro et al., 2015, p.34, cited by Yulianti, Denessen, Droop & Veerman, 2022).

Once again, not all the participants commented on this. This theme was broken up into two themes, parent-to-child relationships and school-to-parent relationships.

Parent-to-child relationships

The variety of factors that contribute towards learning barriers include the lack of parental involvement in the lives and schooling of their children. Parental involvement in learner's lives within School A and School B was an important issue.

School A

The school A's participants emphasized that there is a lack of parent-to-child relationships because, as they argued, parents are often grade repeaters themselves who never really took care of, or had a responsibility for, their education. This has an impact on the amount of attention they invest in their own children's lives and education.

P1A mentioned that,

> *"There is no proper form of parental support in grade repeater's lives. This makes them lazy. Children in the community are given limited to no support by their parents. They are left to the family or community members to take care of if they are around. Parental support is severely lacking in the community and parents simply do not care because they are too involved in their own business".*

School B

School B's participants blame poor parent-to-child relationships, child-headed homes, parents' substance abuse, and lack of support for their children for learners' early-age pregnancies, lack of communication, and lack of performance in education.

T3B explained that,

> *"A lack of parental support negatively impacts learner's schoolwork. Many kids' parents are on drugs, and the kids are just surrounded by no hope for the future".*

T4B reported that,

> *"Parental support is also lacking because there are families who have many young children to attend to at once, knowing that the high birth rate impacts the amount of attention a parent could give a child".*

T5B explained that,

> *"Lack of support from the home front is a major reason for learners to progress or repeat grades for that matter! This impacts on learners' progress and school attendance and impacts on the school as there is no communication between the school and parents".*

P2B reported that,

> *"Socio-economic factors from drug abuse whereby learner's parents are drug lords have an impact on learner achievement as learners are concentrated on joining their family members or even fear them as they may be told to leave home to fend for themselves, hence making it difficult to having a usual schooling career".*

T6B strongly concluded,

> *"When there is a lack of interest and support from home it creates social degeneration. The suffocating home environment plays a major negative role in the emotional status of learners, and this then carries into their academic performances".*

The responses above show that one participant from School A and five participants from School B commented on this issue. The principal from school A spoke of a lack of parental involvement in learners' lives and how children are merely left to the community to take care of. This also comes into play when children are abandoned by either one of their parents and have one single parent-headed home whereby a single mum or dad must go to work long hours to make ends meet. School B's participants emphasized how the lack of parental support at home can go as far as destroying learners' lives. This is because parents leave their children to do what they please. After all, they come from such backgrounds, resulting in young children falling prey to early pregnancies or turning to substance or drug abuse.

The school-parent relationships

The findings point to the poor interaction of schools with parents. There were hardly any parent meetings being held nor were there opportunities for parents to view their children's books or scripts at school. The lack of parental involvement can be an

issue that leads to learners struggling academically because parents do not know much about and ignore their children's school performance. This is a problem from a parental and a schooling perspective.

School A

T1A reported that struggling learners are expected to show their books for their parents to sign off as evidence that they have viewed these books. Meetings with parents are held only when necessary.

T2A confirmed that,

> *"Meetings are held from time to time. Parents are expected to sign their kids' books to monitor what their kids write".*

HOD2A added that,

> *"Parents are called in if learners are experiencing barriers. Few parents play a role in helping learners overcome their barriers. The normal reaction is they shrug their shoulders."*

HOD1A however was more precise about parents' meetings,

> *"Parents meetings are held once per term".*

P1A argued that parent meetings are held more often,

> *"Fortnightly initially and then quarterly. But more importantly, parents are expected to help, support, and encourage their children to work after school to ensure that there is continuity regarding the academic program".*

School B

T3B lamented that,

> *"Parent meetings are not held very often and, when parents are requested to come to school, they don't come!".*

The astonishing reason for not meeting with parents goes beyond the commitment by parents, this is because; T3B surprisingly revealed that,

> *"I will admit there is an apprehension and weariness that I feel when coming to school. Especially after recent events where parents almost wilfully disrespect and disregard us as educators. An incident took place in my class where a girl learner was hurt with a sharp pencil close to her eye during group work. She did not report it to me and carried a story home. The father immediately reacted by coming to school with a gun to shoot or threaten the principal and myself. Fortunately, neither the principal nor was I around. We had different school-related things to do. I still shudder to think what would have happened to us. Shjo!. From this incident, I felt that the parent came in with a pre-meditated idea that if he was not going to get his point across, he was going to shoot the principal or myself for that matter. This makes me feel that teacher's lives especially in this community is so diminished!".*

T4B added that,

> *"Parent's meetings are held twice a term. One-on-one meetings are usually conducted during report collection. Some parents struggle to read/write themselves which makes it difficult. But this does not mean that they cannot oversee their children. Parents never ask to see their children's books as there is often a lack of interest".*

T5B confirmed that,

> *"I normally call the parents in after my findings so that we can work together. This can make them aware of the challenges their child is facing. Then after that, I give feedback twice or thrice a term and where they need to assist".*

T5B also revealed some fear in interacting with parents as it was said,

> *"We have many situations and encounters where parents vent out their aggression and disrespect for teachers. I had an incident once of having been questioned about my qualification and morale as a teacher, simply to prove that the parent has the upper hand".*

T6B acknowledged that, once learners are identified as 'struggling learners', their parents meet with the teachers at least once,

> *"[but this] …does not mean that parents cannot view their children's books at any given time!".*

HOD3B and HOD4 agreed that,

> *"Parent meetings are held once or twice a term as well as in between the term when teachers request to see parents regarding their children's progression,"*

P2B reported more specifically that,

> *"Parents are called into meetings when learners are not producing expected results. Parents are told to sign and check learner books or examinations to understand their child's progress and results. Meetings occur when necessary and this can be even done via WhatsApp groups which the teachers have created with parents".*

The HODs from schools A and B argued that meetings are held with parents but that the latter do not come, and that this does not lead to much and contributes to learner underperformance at schools. The underlying reasons at school B appear to be that teachers often do not like having parent meetings because they fear the reaction they will get from these parents. Also, the ongoing violence in the community surrounding school B makes teachers reluctant to interact with parents because they feel that, as teachers, they may be victims of abuse or murder for having to "complain" about disruptive and weak progressed learners. Thus, these teachers fear for their lives and do not want to interact with the parents.

School A's participants appear to have less interaction with parents compared to school B. This could be because school A is a high school whilst school B is a primary school, which therefore expects learners to be more mature and capable of taking responsibility for their studies compared to younger learners. The response is more multifaceted because in addition the principal and other participants from School B appear to have a more hands-on approach with parents about the learner's academic progress compared to that of School A. School B does not necessarily

interact with parents through physical meetings but through other platforms like social media, SMS, and WhatsApp groups. This could suggest that the impact of the progression policy is producing more problems for the secondary school staff compared to the primary school.

4.5. Theme two: Teaching staff and principals' views about the aim and rationale of the learner progression policy.

Although the learner progression policy aims to decrease the number of repeating learners per class, the participants from both schools explained that the policy had other challenges. Participants of both schools (HOD2A, and HOD4B) argue that the policy is to automatically pass learners to the next grade with a failed mark despite their academic gaps and immaturity. But what stuck out the most was that the policy was played by many struggling learners who found excuses not to work on their academic studies.

School A

HOD1A agreed with the policy,

> *"I do agree with the progression policy, its aim and purpose. I feel that even though it creates some difficulties for teachers at the end of the day, learners need to move on, they cannot remain in the same grade, therefore the learner progression policy is suitable".*

However other school A participants mentioned an unintended aspect of the policy.

T1A had some qualifications,

> *"Progression policy is appropriate and needs to be followed. What I feel is lacking is that learners should also be allocated marks for their behaviour and not only for their academic performance".*

T2A agreed that,

> *"The policy is there to meet learners, especially with potential halfway. In terms of providing them with the opportunity to academically excel instead of*

setting themselves up for failure. Its purpose is to give those learners a chance with the belief that they can make it".

So did HOD1A:

"[the policy] promotes learners' laziness and lack of work ethic. It makes learners believe that they can pass despite not having to work very hard. Also, teachers resist working with disruptive learners who do not make efforts to academically achieve. We as HODs are often called out of our classes to deal with these learners which puts a strain on our workload as well".

However, HOD2A was against the policy:

"No, I do not agree with the learner progression policy. We are almost at a point of pass one, pass all. The fewer the learners with barriers the better our department of education feels. It seems like we are stuck at a point where even if we voice our opinions, it won't necessarily be accounted for".

P1A was circumspect,

"There is nothing much that I can say, however, progression often makes it difficult for those who have progressed to become academically excelling learners. They may be able to achieve an average result, but this is unlikely. The aim of the progression policy was necessary after COVID-19 to assist those topics due to lost teaching. However, recovery of the learning that was lost remains an abstract phenomenon. I agree with the policy when the progressed learner benefits academically. However, it is implemented now as a difficult means to an end".

School B

School B participants were not as supportive of the aim and rationale of the policy. T3B lamented,

"I don't have much engagement with the policy, it is just that the learners are progressing and we as educators must deal with it. I feel that progressing

> *learners only hinders them and is doing an injustice to learners. I disagree with progressing learners and its rationale is not appropriate".*

T4B continued,

> *"The policy causes destruction! It does not help the future of learners".*

T5B agreed with T4B and said,

> *"The progression of learners is not beneficial for learners or educators. It is just not working!"*

T6B had a similar view and argued that the policy,

> *"Is not appropriate as the learning barrier continues to grow which is not necessarily addressed by the teachers the following year".*

HOD3B opposed the policy's aim,

> *"I disagree with the policy because it limits learners and does not give them the freedom to excel on their own. Weak learners should be retained or sent to a remedial school not streamlined! I do not believe that the progression policy has been effectively thought through. I disagree with learner progression."*

This means that learners do not cope with the pressures of the next grade as they have not passed on merit. This makes the learner underprepared and the problem continues until there is proper support and intervention.

HOD4B believed that some learners gain self-confidence through being progressed but disagreed with the progression policy for other learners:

> *"The policy states that a learner cannot spend more than four years in the phase, which means children pass without being academically mature. This causes many dropouts as these learners aren't mentally equipped for mainstream schooling. Learners who are classified as dropouts don't even get the opportunity to go to remedial schools. Furthermore, the process of getting progressed learners to a remedial school through the Screening, Identification*

Assessment and Support (SIAS) is a lengthy one by which the DBE does not swiftly play their part, hence these factors feed into learner exclusion as they don't get into remedial schools".

HOD3B reported ambivalently that,

"The policy is somewhat positive as it allows educators to assist progressed learners in filling their knowledge gaps through interventions, but this can also become too much! However, it has not been thoroughly thought through before its implementation. It does not allow learners to work and make it through to the next grade on their own. It makes learners lazy, they become accustomed to having to pass to the next grade all the time. What good are we doing to our learners, knowing that we need them to enter the senior phase, to get ready for their future, when we continuously pass them with subject knowledge gaps? Once there is a break in the system in this case progressing a learner with learning gaps, it carries major academic problems in the grades to follow".

And so was P2B,

"There are both positive and negative aspects to the progression policy aimed at assisting learners with learning barriers. The positives are that progression brings the number of learners down in a class (fewer failures) as learners move to the next grade, therefore giving the teacher the ability to provide more time to provide weak learners with individual attention. The negative aspects of having to deal with discipline issues because progressed learners who lack foundational or background knowledge fall into the trap of not concentrating in class thus, they cause disruptions and chaos during lessons. I think that the policy will benefit those that will excel. Other than that, I feel that the policy contradicts the act of having the learner study to meet the achievement requirements".

From the responses above, one can conclude that School A's participants were more in agreement with the progression policy and its aim compared to school B's participants. Four participants from school B (T3B, T4B, T5B, and T6B) found that the policy comes across as a deterrent because it is an injustice to learners who do

not learn from being progressed with the result that the policy does not necessarily alleviate or assist with their learning barriers.

In school A, HOD1A agreed with the learner progression policy whilst the other HOD2A disagreed. The HODs felt that progression leads to learner laziness and keeps learners in mainstream schooling for far too long. Whilst the principal from school A had nothing much to say but to hope that learners would produce better academic results from being progressed, the principal from school B had both positive and negative attitudes towards progression.

Ultimately, the participants' responses to this theme explained that the progression policy can be either a stimulant or a drawback to academic success. As mentioned above, many participants felt that progressed learners ideally could benefit from being progressed but there are also some detrimental consequences because these learners do not have any sense of urgency to work because they believe that even if they do not work hard, they will still move over to the next grade. This is likely to continue until these learners realise that their actions did not do them justice in their adult lives as it eventually makes it difficult for them to have access to better opportunities.

To sum up, most of the participants viewed the unintended consequences of the learner progression policy which provides the grounds for learners to manipulate the education system. They also felt that the aim and rationale of the policy are designed to benefit the learners but only if they use it to their full advantage in terms of catching up academically.

4.6. Theme three: The implementation challenges encountered by the teaching staff in their classroom regarding learner progression.

There are multiple implementation challenges in the classrooms. These exist at the level of the teachers and learners. The teacher challenges include poor teacher planning, heavier admin duties with more paperwork, low teacher morale, and work ethic, frustration from teaching progressed learners, lack of training of teachers, and overcrowded classrooms.

The challenges relating to learners include an increase in the number of progressed learners each year, a lack of learner work ethic which produces demotivated progressed learners who do not take their educational milestones seriously, learner absenteeism, learner growing knowledge gaps, a lack of attention from teachers and other learners which creates unruly behaviour in progressed learners, and the overall decline in the quality of education. There are also challenges from the school and district directives.

School A

HOD1A explained that the lack of teacher training and work conditions are what hinder policy implementation.

> *"Overcrowding in classes makes teaching and learning difficult to achieve".*

T2A agreed,

> *"Due to learners progressing, it becomes a problem for the next teacher. I must plan or go the extra mile to accommodate progressed learners. Teachers might also repeat the same thing over and over again because progressed learners cannot keep up at times which bores learners that are excelling".*

Despite agreeing with the learner progression policy, T1A reported that.

> *"Progressed learners are not willing to do their work wholeheartedly. They are not willing to improve nor are they committed to schooling. Teacher planning becomes an issue when working with progressed learners because teachers are planning as per the CAPS curriculum. When progressed learners come up, we do not know how to plan for learners with barriers".*

P1A explained,

> *"What I see is that, in the senior phase, there are the challenges of the lack of work ethic from learners and some educators. Learners show a lack of self-esteem to work in class which causes teacher frustration. This has an impact on the support provided".*

T2A was somewhat in agreement with these learner progression implementation challenges in the classroom. He argued that problematic progressed learners should be dealt with,

> *"Progressed learners should be given a chance to prove or show their potential. Failure to do so would mean that they should not be promoted to the next grade as promoting them demotivates them to work well academically".*

HOD2A went further,

> *"Learners with gaps in their learning will always have challenges because they are passed along and might even feed the dropout rate in high school. If the learners realize this, they can overcome their barriers. The challenge I face is that progressed learners increase every year. We have learners identified in grade 4 or 5 to be placed in special schools but they are still in the mainstream in grade 7. This makes it challenging to provide quality the backlog and gaps in their learning process will only widen. Dropouts at high school will increase, and unemployment in the country on the whole due to dropouts has not helped our learners at all!".*

School B

T6B explained the teacher challenges,

> *"Discipline is a major challenge as gaps are not covered. The actual planning and administration of the policy speaks to us being glorified administrators that must cover previous year's issues".*

Therefore, this makes it difficult for teachers to keep up with current learners in a grade as intervention takes the teacher's focus away.

HOD4B explained that,

> *"The major challenges with the learner progression policy in the senior phase is that it causes overall negative attitudes towards learners as teachers become frustrated, having to spend extra time with weaker learners, making*

the quality of education poorer for learners who are capable of understanding".

HOD4B carried on explaining that the impact of the high number of progressed learners has an impact on teaching and learning in the classroom such that,

"Additionally, due to the lack of concentration by progressed learners, teachers themselves do not feel like conducting support activities because it seems like they put in all the effort to plan and intervene in these learners' lives yet, they are wasting their time. Progressed learners just don't want to try in some cases!".

P2B went on further and stressed that,

"Time constraints are a major challenge to accommodate intervention and support classes. Learners are also not willing to be labelled as 'progressed learners for intervention' so it makes supporting them difficult. Teachers also have a busy schedule from their workloads making the paperwork to refer learners a timeous effort".

T3B lamented that,

"Progressed learners are a real problem! They do not want to improve! and have an impact in class because their academic performance is very low. They work very slowly or don't work at all, they also lack attention and disrupt the class".

T4B agreed that,

"Progressed learners do not want to try, or they make mistakes which they do not want to learn from, therefore, they should not be progressed as they are not clued up with the previous year's content. Repeating a grade is good especially if it will teach them to improve! There is a lot of paperwork to complete like support documents to get learners referred, but if these learners do not get referred, they remain in mainstream schooling, and this causes problems like having to do extra planning for individual intervention activities".

T5B stressed that,

> *"Most progressed learners that I deal with are very laid back, they do not want to work individually! They need assistance all the time. They are also frustrated which makes them lose their self-confidence in wanting to academically improve!".*

T5B went on further to explain that,

> *"Progressed learners are frustrated as most of them are extremely weak. They do not want to work in class and some stay absent most of the time due to their frustrations. Most of them cannot read even a grade-one reader. Accommodating progressed learners in the class is time-consuming as you need to have one-on-one interactions with them all the time. Work needs to be modified to suit learners' needs. In a class of 40 more than a third of them need extensive support".*

This HOD argued that progressed learners harm the quality of education at the school,

> *"Progressed learners have a negative impact in the classroom because they need individual attention, and this causes a slowdown amongst the rest of the learners whereas the children who work well are kept behind with work. The work speed is not at the same pace, and teaching and learning are stifled with the progressed learners making teaching a very difficult job to do!".*

As T6B said, this policy puts a major strain on learners,

> *"Progressed learners can be extremely disruptive because they have not achieved the required academic skills from the previous year. Therefore, underdeveloped skills due to this scholastic gap or backlog will always be prevalent in their lives".*

HOD3B stressed the problem of not passing the learners to the next grade,

> *"Learners are not getting through a grade on their own and on top of this, parents are in denial of learner results. They come to school and argue with*

> *the teachers, they threaten teachers if weak learners don't pass over to the next grade. Teachers are forced to do over and above their work. These learners continue to be lazy and realise they will be carried over to the next grade".*

T3B agreed,

> *The lack of parental support makes improvement difficult. Challenges that I also face are that the district officials seldomly approve the learners-at-risk and therefore force educators to progress all learners who are struggling".*

The participants from school A believed that the challenges come from the impact the policy has on learners, their poor learner commitment, attitudes, knowledge gaps, and lack of ambition to achieve. School A faces heightened policy implementation challenges because of the learner's poor academic performance or academic competencies, learner demotivation, and infrastructural issues like the lack of space to accommodate all learners.

School B's participants felt that implementation challenges come firstly from the impact on teachers like overcrowded classrooms, more work, extra teacher planning, and lack of teacher training. The teachers try to provide, without acknowledgment from the district, support to weak learners to get them to understand better the subject content. Secondly, the challenge is the impact on learners as the latter often have wide knowledge gaps which could come from or result in a lack of interest in school and a high number of absentees per day.

Let us turn to the data and evidence gathered on theme four which is about the responses and support teachers use or need for struggling learners.

4.7. Theme four: The response and support teachers use and need to support the struggling learners.

Teachers need to identify the learners' learning barriers to support in class these struggling progressed learners. The questions posed were about how to diagnose the learning barriers of progressed learners and what kind of support strategies were used or needed to assist struggling learners.

4.7.1. Identification and diagnosis of struggling learners' problems

Teachers have problems in identifying problems posed by struggling learners. These problems are many such as teachers' unpreparedness to compile correct reports, the school's (SBST and HOD) lack of teacher support, lack of good feedback from lower grade colleagues, the inadequate role played by the district and the directives provided by the Gauteng Department of Education (GDE).

School A and School B explained their slightly differentiated methods to identify struggling progressed learners.

School A

P1A explained that the teachers and school diagnoses learning barriers through baseline assessments at the beginning of the year and the start of each term. After academic assessments and if no progress is shown, a referral is made to a professional

HOD2A said that,

> *"Professionals must diagnose learning barriers. We, the HODs also play a role in identifying learners and informing parents about the testing process".*

T2A explained a caveat,

> *"The school uses a screening tool to diagnose learners and identify barriers to learning. However, the poorly performing learners are not placed or referred to special schools. The SBST is almost non-functional".*

T1A contradicted T1B slightly about the SBST,

> *"The SBST assists teachers to identify learners with barriers to learning but then the department takes time to help".*

HOD1A agreed that,

> *"The school-based support team (SBST) assists with diagnosing learning barriers but does not elaborate much about this".*

School B

School B participants were more detailed in their explanation of how struggling learners are identified in terms of their knowledge and learning gaps and how they are supported. This is done through baseline assessments and meetings with previous grade teachers for the enhancement of intervention strategies that can date back to previous grades or previous cognitive levels.

T3B explained that learners are identified at the end of term one through the marks that they receive in that term.

> *"The educator then fills in a SNA 1 and 2 form but, thereafter, there is no follow-up strategy for early identification".*

T4B went further and provided more details.

> *"There are usually meetings held with previous teachers and their heads of departments at the beginning of the year to get feedback from them about learner performances".*
>
> *"At the beginning of each term, baseline assessments are done to diagnose subject learning and content gaps, but this too is often not enough because baseline assessments do not necessarily suffice for all the content and diagnostic analysis from these baseline assessments is not necessarily purposeful".*

T5B responded that,

> *"In most cases, the teachers who have identified the struggling learners will meet with previous class teachers to clear up any uncertainties. Once the problem has been identified and analysed, a range of possible interventions would be generated".*

However, T6B disagreed,

> *"I am a grade 7 educator and there is nothing done in previous grades to help the struggling learners. There is no form of accountability taken from previous grade teachers".*

Out of frustration, this teacher posed the question: How much can I do for struggling learners?

P2B summarized the process,

> *"Firstly, baseline assessments (a GDE requirement) are done to test learner knowledge about how much they know and their knowledge gaps. If the learner is too weak a meeting is held with the learner and the parents. A SNA document is filled out and interventions are done accordingly by the teacher. If the interventions do not work, learners are referred to the SBST and the district will then step in to finalise the matter".*

From these responses, it seems that there is a lot of tension and emotions around the identification of learning barriers. In school A, it is understood by some participants that the SBST is somewhat non-functional. In school B, it seems that there is some form of enforcement by the SBST to get teachers to come together during meetings to discuss the previous year's struggling learners and the preparation of the required documents (even if T6B does not agree with this).

Some participants argued that teachers and the staff have some GDE directives which are to conduct baseline assessments, compile support documents, have parental meetings, departmental meetings, and conduct assessments. However, the problem is that after that there is no effective follow-up because of the poor functioning of the SBST and the district in terms of providing adequate support strategies. Hence, teachers complete the identification and support process, but their report is often swept under the carpet, resulting in struggling learners being progressed and not referred to remedial schools as such.

4.7.2. Support mechanisms to assist academic learner learning barriers - School-based factors.

The question posed was "What do educators in each phase do about the challenges of learners?" Does the school have an academic improvement plan which targets learning gaps for progressed learners?" "What forms of support interventions or support programmes are most effective and least effective in assisting progressed learners?"

Some positive support methods were mentioned as supporting learners with learning barriers, such as weekend support programs, intervention classes, learner consequences for not obtaining the minimum pass performance results, in-class learner assistance through one-on-one or individual teaching methods, and the alignment of the annual teaching plan (ATP) with the improvements plans.

School A

T1A and T2A explained that there were support classes on weekends and after school as intervention periods but that not many struggling learners pitched up.

T2A said that as a result,

> *"The challenges of learners fall back onto the teacher because the teacher has to put in lots of work for learners to pass".*

HOD2A reported that the education department should go back to the 'old-school' way of doing things whereby,

> *"Learners are punished, and consequences instilled for learner bad behaviour and not willing to produce academic results".*

HOD1A and HOD2A agreed that support had been given to learners on a one-to-one basis during class, afternoons, or weekend class sessions while HOD2A added that the education department should go back to the 'old school' way of doing things,

> *"[Poorly performing} learners should be punished, and consequences instilled for learners bad behaviour who are not willing to work hard to produce better academic results".*

P1A was more optimistic and mentioned that there is usually an improvement plan in place,

> *"Each subject educator designs a progress plan aligned with the recovery plan and the annual teaching plans to assist struggling learners".*

School B

The participants from school B emphasised the use of more interventions. These can be devised by strategic intervention plans. Various other methods would be more advantageous in assisting learners with barriers to learning such as increased collaboration amongst teachers, SMT, and HODs and re-visiting of previous year's subject content when teaching learners to bridge learner knowledge gaps. Moreso, additional support with the assistance of specialists, like those in the field of educational psychology or specialist assistants. These specialists could assist learners with gaining confidence in their education and the consequences therefrom (like that of failure on numerous occasions) for not academically performing. This should in turn be re-enforced by the Department of Education as a means to mitigate learners learning barriers. Further to this, there is a need for remedial classes, enhanced teacher training, stakeholders working not as ‘separate units’ with teachers working in isolation, the teachers being unable to keep up, smaller class sizes, and campaigns to get learners to study more.

P2B emphasises the work of individual teachers,

> *“Intervention is expected to be done by teachers within the class as they know their learners best!”.*

HOD4B elaborated that,

> *“Teachers are forced to do lower grade phonics, reading, and constructing simple sentences with learners. A referral is then made with a specialist and mediation is taken to get learners into specialist schools after discussions with the parents of these learners”.*

T3B is not as optimistic about the support strategies,

> *“I would think that interventions would yield better learning outcomes for struggling learners, but, in my knowledge, nothing is being done by educators to assist learning barriers. We do not have a collective intervention plan as our teachers work in their classes and sometimes do not want to be disturbed by the grade heads. Their interventions are planned by themselves and conducted during individual classes”.*

T4B agreed and mentioned that,

> *"Teachers are not skilled enough to deal with learning barriers and we need to cover curriculum which is prioritised by our department. There are changes every year, we need to have patience, compassion, and different teaching methodologies that work. I firmly believe that learners' academic foundation needs to be solid; it starts from the bottom up, we need to fail the learners who are not performing at the foundation phase so that their parents can understand that there will be repercussions for the neglect of their child's education".*

T6B agreed that,

> *"Teachers are not equipped with such skills to alleviate learning barriers, teachers should be allowed to teach fully and not be glorified administrators who file more than they teach, allow us to concentrate and let retention rest with the educator and not the Department of Education".*

On better support interventions, T4B mentioned the need to work more in collaboration with the grade heads of departments and reported that grade heads work as a collective, collaborating, and delegating duties. Although intervention plans are in the work-in-progress form, the intervention activities allow for some struggling learners to improve. The forms of interventions conducted according to this teacher were,

> *"Breaking up concepts, using colour coding, going back to the basics like phonics and dictionary use for spelling, doing lower grade activities and one-on-one activities in class however, interventions are not given much time because of the hurry to complete the Annual Teaching Plan".*

T5B agreed that teachers work too much in isolation,

> *"Each educator does whatever they think is best now for that learner, we do not necessarily share ideas. Each teacher has his or her plan to assist struggling learners. Learners are different and have different challenges so the plan to assist must not be generalised".*

T5B added that,

> *"Learning to read as well as teaching learners to read is of cardinal importance. Reading is the basis for learning and unlocks all the learning skills needed at school. I usually read with the learners twice or thrice a week before and after contact teaching time, the writing activities I intervene whilst learners are completing but only a handful of learners improve the rest are challenges that need specialised people therefore, not everyone prospers".*

T5B went further,

> *"Yes, there should be alternatives! There should be remedial classes at school to accommodate progression where there are fewer learners in a class and one-on-one interaction can take place. They can then learn at their own pace instead of having to compete with stronger learners".*

T6B recommended that,

> *"Teachers should be allowed to teach the old school way; smaller class groups will be able to yield better academic results".*

T3B added that,

> *"We had a lady assisting learners with reading, but she has now left".*

HOD3B added that,

> *"Sometimes we have social workers and RAU interns to assist learners who have emotional and social needs. These people also help our learners on a one-to-one basis".*

These RAU or University of Johannesburg interns are students who team up with schools to do their student practicals during their period of studying.

HOD3B mentioned school-wide support interventions,

> *"Learners who struggle with reading are referred to the readers' club at school which assists learners to read in each phase".*

HOD4B agreed,

> *"The support programmes to assist struggling learners are reading campaigns after school hours to encourage young minds to become active. We expect learners to join these campaigns and join the library".*

From the responses above, it seems that most teachers complained that they are working on supporting struggling progressed learners by themselves as they work in isolated spaces. They don't work as a collective in the same phase but tend to take charge of their classes, without sharing with their colleagues vital educational information about learners with learning barriers.

Moreover, it was gathered that very little assistance from the SBST (which includes the HODs and principals) and the DBST exists for these pressurized teachers in both schools. It seems like the SBST of both schools relies mainly on the teachers to come up with support interventions for struggling or progressed learners The teachers play a critical role in the achievement and academic development of learners but motivated school leaders and the SBST could play an additional influential role in building teachers' confidence to assist these struggling learners (Bojuwoye, et al., 2014). However, this is not happening at these schools. Furthermore, it appears as if School A has support programmes such as support classes after school hours and on weekends in place whilst School B relies more on external structures (such as university interns and specialists) to assist with learner support.

4.7.3. Non-school-based Factors and programmes in support of mitigating learners' learning barriers.

Participants mentioned other factors (beyond the school) that are involved in assisting with learners' learning barriers, such as referring learners to places that will assist them, having a healthier parent-to-child, parent-to-school and school-to-parent support which would aid learner referrals to relevant schools, equipping teachers at the tertiary level to deal with learner-learning barriers, education specialist assistance, teacher workshops training, collaborating with other schools and teachers who face similar learner barriers within their schools through PLCs, parental transparency about learner illness or educational difficulties, support

programmes by the DBE and NGOs, and health care facilities creating programmes to assist learners at school.

School A

A few non-school-based factors were mentioned by school A participants.

T1A reported that,

> *"Learners who have severe learning barriers need to be referred to the necessary institutes and parents need to step up to support their children at home. There needs to be a relationship between the learner, parent, and school. All three counterparts need to work together. Additionally, teachers need to be equipped with the skills and knowledge to deal with struggling learners which can be done through their tertiary studies. Now, this is not what is taught".*

T2A explained that,

> *"I strongly believe that tertiary level studies do not teach us how to teach reading and writing at the senior phase level, it is assumed that learners should already have this foundational knowledge therefore to alleviate barriers to learning, professionals should visit schools on a timely basis such as social workers and teachers that are specialised in teaching learners with barriers".*

P1A also agreed that teachers are not trained with emotional or social barriers affecting the learners of the school which makes it difficult for teachers to intervene effectively.

School B

Non-school-based factors were mentioned by school B participants.

T5B stressed the parents' role,

> *"The starting point is to support and assist learners at home, then the teacher will give support according to the learner's needs. I am not equipped to teach struggling learners as they have different barriers to learning. Some*

conditions are medical issues that require medical personnel. Some parents do not even disclose some information to us, or they are in denial of their child's condition. This makes it difficult for us as teachers to assist where they can or should be".

T6B agreed,

"Educators do their intervention and support, however at times, not much is being done to assist challenges of learners besides some interventions here and there. This is where parental support should come in. Interventions do assist if learners focus but only if we had more support as to what to tackle and had all educators singing from the same hymn sheet".

HOD3B and HOD4B believed that progression and learning barriers can be alleviated by getting parental involvement in learners' lives. Struggling learners need the involvement of their parents to excel and do well at school. Moreso, HOD4B reported that,

"Parents or guardians must sit with their children, encourage reading and educational videos".

T3B emphasised teacher training but also the need for specialists.

"Teachers need to attend workshops about learning barriers and how to assist these learners as we are currently using our discretion on how to help these learners. Attending meetings like that of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) can be tiring and time-consuming for us teachers who already have a heavy workload. Remedial reading classes could also help tremendously for those who cannot read. For the other challenges from the emotional side, I feel that a psychologist and a social worker should be appointed to assist many of our kids who have trauma that's negatively implicating their academic performance".

T5B also mentioned the need for teacher training and specialists.

"Teachers should be allowed to visit special schools to gain hands-on experience, have organisations that will help with telephonic queries, learner

> *support programmes to be implemented by the DBE and non-government organisations, behaviour modification programmes to boost learner self-esteem, learners to be sent to special schools on some days for assessment purposes and for them to work with these specialist teachers".*

P2B also mentioned the need for other professionals to alleviate societal and emotional issues interfering with learners' learning.

> *"Health care professionals from the local hospital or centres should visit schools to workshop learners about how to deal with the ills of society like that of sexual, drug, and child abuse. Furthermore, the local police forum must become actively involved in the eradication of crime in our community".*

Finally, I would like to add that, in my experience, even if teachers want to intervene in solving social or emotional issues, learners are not prone to make the change for their betterment. It may be because teachers are afraid to address such matters for fear that they may have consequences to face in society. There was an incident whereby a teacher once addressed parents about bullying from their child. It was later discovered that the parent drew a weapon at the teacher for having reported the child to the other parent. Thus, teachers can feel reluctant to address matters that affect children because they fear for their lives.

4.8. Theme five: Monitoring and support of the learner progression policy by the SBST and the district.

4.8.1. Supporting Role of the SBST and the District

A major challenge encountered by the teacher participants of this research study was the role of the SBST and the district which often did not provide much support for progressed learners or their teachers. Support programmes are left to the teachers to construct and implement in their respective classrooms. This leads to the number of progressed learners with knowledge gaps increasing each year because of the lack of support and monitoring of the learner progression policy by the school and district. The participants were asked about the support given by the SBST and the district in supporting teachers to interpret and make meaning of the progression policy, with many responses being critical.

School A

The school A participants emphasised that the DBST should assist the SBST in the school with policy implementation through training and workshops. Additionally, the SBST and DBST should become more hands-on in assisting teachers with intervention strategies for struggling learners and encourage teachers to implement policies more effectively.

P1A explained the rather long process involved,

> *"The SBST monitors and makes meaning of the policy by mediating the policy with the educators, but it is a huge battle to get teachers motivated to implement this progression policy because it entails more administrative work. The SBST is very much functional in our school. Once the teacher identifies the progressed or academically challenged learner, s/he then does interventions (with evidence). If there is still no improvement on the learner's part, the matters are referred to the SBST. Recommendations are then made and sent to me, the principal, to finalise. The policy is also made in a meeting or via a signed circular by the DBST and mediated through regular meetings with the HODs, Deputy Principal and subject teachers".*

However, teachers have another take. T1A responded that,

> *"The SBST needs to be trained and workshopped about supporting teachers in the implementation of the learner progression policy – it feels as they do not want to support us, and more that they lack the knowledge to support us".*

T2A agreed,

> *"The SBST is almost non-functional in our school which is another challenge. The SBST team does not know about the challenges around the learner progression policy. The DBST team also doesn't come in to assist".*

But HOD1A explained that some monitoring and support by the SBST exists as,

> *"They make recommendations and referrals of progressed learners. They support us through meaning-making of the policy through workshops".*

HOD2A argued that more needed to be done,

> *"The SBST should encourage intervention support throughout the teaching process, meaning that, they should take over intervention classes. This should be so as it is a bit difficult for educators because they need to get through the content teaching".*

What I discovered from these responses was that most school A's participants agreed that the SBST and DBST are well functioning besides some teachers. This disagreement could be an indication that most participants spoke positively about the SBST and DBST, perhaps to make it known to the researcher of this study that all stakeholders are working well and collaborating, which may or may not be happening in reality. Most of these participants may want to "shield" their school and show that it is a well-functioning school, whilst the situation is not what it is happening on the ground.

School B

The responses from school B differ from school A in that most teacher participants believed that the SBST and DBST function poorly in assisting them with struggling learners because they do not put much effort into monitoring the progression policy implementation. However, the HODs and principal disagreed by stating that the SBST and the DBST work well together.

T3B mentioned that,

> *"The SBST at our school is functioning minimally. There is no support from them in general. They just tell us that the learners at risk were not approved that these learner's marks must be adjusted, and that they should progress. I have heard that the DBST assists especially in the foundation phase. However, I am unaware of a situation where they have assisted us in the Senior Phase with interventions".*

T4B continued,

> *"The SBST has meetings in isolation, feedback is not necessarily given after they attend workshops or their feedback doesn't help us at all, only the*

favoured teachers are met with. The SBST is not clued up with how to work with the policy. The principal within the SBST does play an active role in the monitoring of policy implementation. The DBST does assist in terms of workshops, but these workshops are focused entirely on core curriculum and assessments, nothing much about the "how to" conduct interventions with struggling learners. Also, when the DBE visits schools they are concentrated on curriculum management and not the interventions conducted. We don't even know how many intervention activities to complete per term or the criteria of these intervention activities".

T5B lamented that,

"The SBST needs to support the teachers by addressing challenges that they are facing. However, most people in the SBST do not have extra training in one of the specialised competency areas emerging from the progression policy".

T5B further explained that the school as a whole is doing whatever it can do with the minimum knowledge and resources they have,

"The DBST comes in very seldomly as it does not give support and training but does come in to conduct visits at times. The DBST comes in to assess learners who need to be placed in special schools, but this is done when the major work has been concluded by the teachers and SBST. Also, the referral process is lengthy and not beneficial for the child. It takes years for the DBST to fully assess and deal with these learners".

T6B explained that,

"The SBST does not have any workshops with staff relating to the meaning-making of the progression policy. The SBST will wait until the learners are in grade 7 to catch a wake-up call about the implementation of the learner progression policy! The DBST does assist educators with minimal intervention strategies but only when the learners reach grade 7".

HODs reported that the SBST is much more active in assisting teachers with supporting their learners and monitoring support documents.

It was reported by HOD3B that,

> *"We the HODs request teachers to engage in the progression policy. HODs then workshop it with teachers to familiarise themselves with it and identify various challenges with a suggestion that the DBST must initiate that we put all progressed learners in one class and have specialised teachers to facilitate these learners which would take the pressure off teachers. The DBST should also be regularly involved but this seldomly occurs".*

P2B explained that,

> *"The SBST gives guidelines to teachers about progression, it mediates and shares ideas. But this is a difficult task because teachers are sometimes on their own bus. They feel that policy pressurises them and is an added responsibility, hence the reluctance to complete interventions. The difficult cases are referred to the SBST to be referred to the district".*

The above responses are confirmed by the document analysis conducted. The documents which include improvement plans and SNA documents in school B, reveal that school B has a school-based support team policy in place, that SNA 1 and 2 documents are completed and Individual Support Plans (ISPs) for struggling learners are developed to structure the interventions. Further to this, there are psychological reports about struggling learners that aid in assisting the district SNA3 reports (all these were made available by the principal of school B). However, these documents are only completed when learners reach the senior phase after being progressed over time. This is when school B can refer these struggling learners with severe learning barriers to remedial schools.

There were no documents analysed in School A. Instead, school A teachers strongly voiced their opinions about the poor support provided by their support teams and the deficiency around interventions for struggling learners due to this lack of support. The participants of both schools emphasize that the SBSTs are not necessarily very active, and therefore of little assistance to teachers. Multiple reasons were

mentioned, such as teachers working in isolation (as mentioned by T4B), teachers not seeking explicit help with some feeling intimidated by the support provided. There is also a lack of training for SBST members, or inappropriate support programmes initiated by the SBST who may find handling learners' academic problems challenging because learners are not well known to them.

The district appears too slow, taking a lot of time to follow up on the SBST recommendations as if the district was not too keen on preventing learner progression in mainstream schools. Thus, the SBST and the DBST do not seem to assist teachers in dealing appropriately with progressed learners. Hence, the support required from the SBST and the district by the teaching staff should include training and workshopping of teachers about policy implementation, and more collaboration amongst the SBST and the DBST so that they work more closely with teachers about improved ways to implement the progression policy.

What becomes clear from most participants' responses on this issue is that teachers, HODs, and principals blame one another for the default in the progression policy implementation. Teachers blame the HODs and SBST for not adequately monitoring and evaluating the policy's implementation whilst the HODs and principals point at the teachers for not supporting sufficiently progressed learners and getting on board when it comes to the implementation guidelines. Most teachers believe also that the SBST and DBST do not support them adequately and that they are the ones doing all the hard work whilst the HODs and the principal defend themselves and contradict the teachers.

4.8.2. Alleviating policy implementation challenges by the SBST and the DBST

School A

The school A participants emphasised that the alleviation of policy implementation challenges begins with more district training of the SBST, the district's continuous support of teachers and the SBST through better monitoring practices and processes as well as the swift placement of referred learners with severe learning barriers into remedial schools before they transition into the secondary schooling.

T1A and T2A agreed with each other. T1A mentioned more training from the SBST and T2A said,

> *"The SBST needs to simply ensure that the necessary stakeholders be informed about learner progression and that all documentation must be completed and signed off by them and the DBST must be on board from the start to the finish".*

HOD1A urged the DBST,

> *"What is necessary is for the DBST to monitor intervention in schools and refer learners more quickly than they are".*

HOD2A agreed that,

> *"The DBE must intervene by providing us with support specialists whom we don't have within our school".*

P1A explained that,

> *"The district should assist by coming into schools and seeing what it is that we need to deal with on the ground. Also, placement of learners must be done before grade 8 so that we don't sit with problems in grade 8 – 12".*

School B

The school B participants emphasised that implementation challenges can be alleviated in many ways. These range from training teachers on how to conduct interventions, and training the SBST about effective implementation strategies to the more effective role of the SBST and district and the better understanding of parents of learners who have academic challenges. In addition, other ways in which policy implementation challenges may be alleviated include open interactions with the DBE by teachers, more accountability by the SBST to teachers about implementation processes, having specialists conduct interventions according to learner's abilities, and having intervention booklets devised for each grade which are separate to subject content textbooks.

T5B also explained the importance of teacher training,

> *"Special schools should be made for the training and support of teachers; teachers should be trained at universities on how to work with progressed learners that have different learning barriers. Psychologists and other therapists must be in each school to assist learners and teachers. Continuous in-service training programmes must be made compulsory for teachers to be more knowledgeable. The DBE should also allow teachers to raise concerns as they deal with these learners daily instead of them being told strictly what to do!".*

P2B agreed that,

> *"What the DBE should do is workshop teachers on interventions or have an intervention booklet per subject put together for each phase. I have seen intervention booklets for Grade 6 Social Sciences which is Geography and History, but this needs to be put together across all subjects or learning areas".*

T3B pointed at the principal, SBST, and DBST,

> *"The principal as part of the SBST should be the driving force to ensure successful policy implementation. The DBST should conduct workshops for the SBST to be trained on what to do, how to do it, and who to be in contact with".*

T4B mentioned a bigger role for the SBST,

> *"Feedback should be provided by the SBST, and the teachers should not be kept in the dark about progressed learner's referrals because they often feel like they complete all the administrative duties such as filling out the SNA documentation and support programmes but without getting feedback from the SBST".*

T6B lamented about the SBST and DBST,

> *"There must be accountability from the SBST informing the principal about all aspects of policy and its implementation. The DBST can assist by providing*

> *us with trained professionals to assist with interventions and support programmes".*

HOD3B agreed that,

> *"The DBST must initiate that we put all progressed learners in one class and have specialised teachers to facilitate these learners which would take the pressure off teachers. The DBST should also be regularly involved which seldomly occurs".*

T5B went further and mentioned the role of the DBST and parents,

> *"After the SBST has done their work, the documentation must be sent to the principal to conduct their own assessments. The principal must check if the procedure was followed and then she can decide based on the findings and send information to the DBST for assessment purposes. The DBST should also make it mandatory for parents of struggling learners to attend workshops and support programmes so that they can be able to see the need for and importance of their children. The school and the DBE alone cannot deal with struggling learners on their own as most of the problems are rooted at home and out of the school context".*

School B's participants had more ideas than school A's participants about how to alleviate the problematic aspects of the policy implementation. The school A participants mainly spoke about the SBST having to be trained and the role of the DBST. Teachers at school A appeared willing to complete the necessary documentation to refer learners but what they needed was better support and structure from the SBST and the district which was lacking.

School B's participants spoke more widely about teacher training, remedial specialists and classes, a more hands-on principal, constant feedback by the SBST to the teachers and transparent SBST reports about learners with learning barriers amongst others. Ultimately, both schools require much more effective support from the SBST, the district, and the DBE which has the responsibility of training teachers and stakeholders to become the best that they can be within their practice (Du Plessis & Mbunyuza, 2014).

4.8.3. The way forward for the learner progression policy

From the responses above it can be said that most participants felt that more needed to be done to assist schools and teachers with struggling learners on the ground for a better implementation of the learner progression policy. The teaching staff and principals were asked their opinions about the way forward, possible changes that could be made, and potential alternatives to the learner progression policy.

School A

T1A and T2A are in support of the policy but they suggested that the DBE should intervene more and assist them with the high number of progressed learners.

T1A explained,

> *"Additional people need to be hired to assist teachers at schools in completion of intervention activities or perhaps make the curriculum more exciting for learners to build their motivation for learning."*

T2A suggested that the policy should be kept, however,

> *"The DBE must re-consider the minimum pass mark so that learners have something to work towards and find ways to prove to progressed learners that failing will not benefit them in the future".*

School B

Some School B participants agreed that the progression policy should not be eliminated but they wanted more support and additional ways to assist with the referral of some learners and their placement in other schools.

T3B said that,

> *"It is just that the process of referring learners should be better".*

T5B reported that,

> *"The DBE must assist in the placement of learners as learners get assessed but there is nothing done about it thereafter".*

A few other participants manifested their opposition to the learner progression policy. They argued that progressed learners abuse the learner progression policy as it feeds into their habit of having to be academically weak and yet eventually move over to the next grade. Hence, retaining a learner was often favoured rather than more support interventions for struggling learners.

T4B believed that the policy should be replaced even though this teacher complied with the policy and its guidelines,

> *"The policy should be taken away. We should go back to the previous times when learners failed despite the number of years in a phase as that made them realise that working for their marks leads to academic success!".*

HOD4B continued,

> *"Yes, I do think that there should be an alternative to the policy. If learners do not meet the requirements, they should be automatically placed in specialised schools where their talent lies. In higher grades, they should be taught a trade where they will be able to be successful members of society. Therefore, another policy should be created to meet the needs of struggling learners".*

P2B confirmed this by saying,

> *"Progressed learners should be placed in special or remedial schools before grade 8 to minimize problems in grades 8 – 12 school years".*

From the responses above, two school A's participants (T1A and T2A) highly favoured the learner progression policy, whilst some school B participants felt that the policy should not be eradicated but implemented with better interventions and support from various quarters. These participants felt that the SBST and the DBST should step up their assistance with progressed learners. This includes better techniques to develop swift processes around the successful implementation of the policy, quicker learner placements into remedial schools, and ensuring and encouraging parental involvement in struggling learner's lives.

In addition to the above, the DBE should firstly, be making provision for teacher training on policy implementation and professional development and secondly,

minimize the high number of learners in one class by building technologically advanced schools with more classes, which would aid technological skills for learners to cope in the everchanging world that we live in.

Only two school B participants disagreed and were in favour of the elimination of the policy, and that the DBE should increase the minimum pass mark so that learners will work harder at passing while referring struggling learners to remedial schools much quicker.

The next chapter presents the discussion, recommendations, and conclusion for this study.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION, RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

5.1. Introduction

The preceding chapter reported on the participants' views and perceptions about the learner progression policy, the policy implementation challenges faced by the schools and teaching staff on the ground as well as the support needed and available to teachers. It analysed the data using the content as per theme coming from verbatim interview responses, audio recordings, and document analysis to prepare for the data interpretation.

In this chapter, the key findings of the research questions are interpreted through the interpretive policy analysis conceptual framework for each theme and compared with other studies on similar topics. It concludes with some recommendations for each research question.

The research questions are, (1) What are the teaching staff and principal's understanding and views of the causes of learners with learning barriers?, (2) What are the teaching staff and principals' views about the aim and rationale of the learner progression policy?, (3) What are the implementation challenges encountered by the teaching staff in their classroom regarding learner progression?, (4) What forms of response and support do teachers use and need to assist the struggling learners? and (5) How do the school-based support team (SBST) and the district support team (DSBT) follow up and monitor learners with learning barriers and is it assisting them?

5.2. Theme One: Teaching staff and principal's understanding of the causes of learners' learning barriers.

This study reveals that the majority of teaching staff and principal participants believe that the main causes for learners' learning barriers are beyond the learners and the context of the school. They include and are not limited to factors in the broader external socio-economic sphere and the education system sphere. A few internal school factors and learners' social and emotional factors as well as parent-child-school relationships were also mentioned. School-based and learner-based social and emotional factors that influence learning barriers are found in many international and national studies. However, research studies differ slightly about the most important factors behind learners' learning barriers.

Two (T2A and HOD2A) out of five participants in school A and three (T5B, HOD3B, and HOD4B) out of seven participants in school B identify as causes of dropout first and foremost socio-economic factors such as poverty, unemployment, learner absenteeism (because of learners begging on the streets to earn a living), drug and alcohol abuse, as well as gang-related violence and gangsterism. It also found that the education system itself (external factor) contributes to learners' learning barriers and potential dropout. A study conducted by Adelman and Taylor (2017) agreed that learning barriers come mainly from socio-economic backgrounds because learners with living conditions in poverty-stricken hostile home environments face lessened opportunities to develop the readiness and commitment required to succeed at school. This is in contrast with a study conducted in Uganda which found that the socio-economic factors of families have a minimal impact or influence on learner achievements compared to school factors (such as school material resources and teacher quality) (Hungi, Ngware, Mahuro & Muhia, 2016). The study found that learners' learning barriers come rather from internal school and family factors such as high pupil-to-teacher ratios, high teacher absenteeism rates, shortage of textbooks, and insufficient participation by parents (Hungi, Ngware, Mahuro & Muhia, 2016).

The education system and in particular the DBE learner progression policy and the promotion of minimal grade pass requirements make some learners struggle. Participants against the policy argued that it encourages learners' laziness and poor

attitudes in putting much effort into passing their subjects, knowing they will eventually pass. This resulted in some learners obtaining poor to average passes with an overall lack of fundamental subject knowledge, leading to a continuous increase in the number of progressed learners who will continue to struggle.

This study found out that many school-level obstacles contribute to learners' learning barriers: overcrowded unventilated classes, a disruptive schooling environment for those who want to learn or excel in classes, a lack of learning materials made worse by vandalization, a lack of school resources made worse because of theft, and a lack of teacher and learner morale. This is confirmed by the study of Nkosi and Adebayo (2021) in Kwa-Zulu Natal which argues that poor school environments are responsible for creating learning barriers and poor learners' performance.

Zwane and Malale (2018) also point to the poor school support for struggling learners, the lack of learning aids, and other learning materials such as a basic ruler, pen, or pencil (often due to the high living costs and families' poverty). These set some learners back and reduce their learning in class leading to a situation of continuously needing to catch up with their peers, which rarely happens (Najjingo 2009; Zwane & Malale, 2018).

Another school-level factor mentioned in this study is the poor collaboration among teachers, parents, principals, and district officials. The participants of primary school B participants mentioned that teachers work in their isolated spaces, don't expect support from the SBST, DBST, or the parents, and therefore take it upon themselves to find ways to implement the progression policy. From an interpretive point of view, the breakdown of communication and lack of support from the DBST to the school leave gaps in policy implementation.

At the level of the classroom, teacher-centered teaching trying to cover the whole rigid demanding curriculum does not cater to diversified learners (linguistic, cultural ethnic, social-emotional, cognitive, academic, sensory, and physical diversities) and increases learning barriers for struggling learners.

At the level of learners, most participants from both schools agreed that learners were demotivated because their own social and emotional factors were not attended to. Some learners suffer from negative peer pressure resulting in an emotional

breakdown, traumatisation, psychological abuse, and lack of confidence, especially when they are over-aged, progressed learners. Karacabey and Boyaci (2018) confirm that such learners with socio-emotional challenges don't perform well while Li and Li (2023) specify that these challenges impact these learners' poor study methods and habits of these struggling methods.

At the level of the parent-to-child relationships, parents are part and parcel of the learning that takes place at school. Most school A participants argued that children are too often left to fend for themselves in single-parent homes or in households where parents spend most of their time at work, with little time spent with their children. School B's participants added that parents who do not control or set boundaries for their children often end up with disrespectful children who do not want to take advice from parents or teachers and end up falling prey to the ills of the community or society. Many studies have found that the absence of parental participation in the learners' lives poses heightened learners' learning barriers (Mnguni, 2017; Ngema & Maphalala, 2021; Weybright et al., 2017).

Thus, all these studies point out that poor academic success or barriers to learning come from multifaceted, cross-level influences that are found at the level of the society, family, school, teacher, and individual learner (Weybright et al., 2017). Even though the influence of these various levels differs in different countries, this study points out that socio-economic factors are a key reason behind learners' learning barriers and poor academic performance. This study's findings rejoin the political analytical approach to policy which would argue that the socio-economic inequalities in South Africa and the unequal education system which favours the rich have the greatest impact on teachers and learners. This study reveals major determinants causing learner dropout.

Whilst schools A and B both identify socio-economic factors (poverty, unemployment, and learner absenteeism), drug and alcohol abuse gangsterism, and a staggering education system as factors leading to learner dropout, School A interestingly identified continuous learner progression as a key determinant to learner dropout as learners are continuously progressed (as required by the learner progression policy) from one grade to another often without having their lack of knowledge gaps filled. School B identified learners' learning barriers as a key determinant for learner

dropout. Learners who have parents who are also dropouts tend to have a negative parent-to-school relationship, increasing the chances of their children dropping out of school.

5.3. Theme two: Teaching staff and principals' views about the aim and rationale of the learner progression Policy

The aim and intention of the progression policy in South Africa is to promote learner dignity and self-esteem (Ngema & Maphalala, 2021), reduce the number of learners in a grade by allowing them the right of only being retained once per schooling which minimizes failing to no more than four years in a 12-year schooling cycle so that learners can stay in school instead of dropping out (Munje & Maarman, 2016; Nkosi & Adebayo, 2021).

The research study found that most participants from secondary school A agree with the intention of the progression policy because the policy gives learners a second chance to perform by getting support interventions to understand their cognitive problems and work on them in the next grade level. They see the policy as a means to keep learners in school by giving them more chances and confidence to try and improve their academic study and performance. It will also reduce the number of learners in class.

A few school B participants, however, do not agree with the aim and rationale of the policy because they believe that it leads to a lot of laziness in learners who realize that they would be 'pushed over' to the next grade without having to make the minimum grade pass requirements. These few participants against the aim and rationale of the policy feel that the policy does more harm than good because it is not properly thought through. They argue that the policy results in too many seriously struggling learners being kept far too long in mainstream schools, something that leads to major problems for teachers and learners alike. Many progressed learners end up continuing to struggle in the grade that they are progressed to because they cannot close the gaps in their foundational knowledge, lose their confidence, and have discipline and laziness issues because they know they will be pushed over to the next grade without having to put in serious academic efforts.

Some school B participants seem to argue that special schools should be relied on by mainstream schools or that struggling learners should not progress too quickly, especially at the early stages of schooling. This resonates with the experiences or actions of schools in countries such as Denmark, Sweden, Japan, Korea, the United Kingdom, and Finland. Studies in these countries (Ngema & Mapahala, 2021) show that schools don't always work with or rely on the progression policy when they come across underperforming learners. Instead, they keep them in the same grade and give them various forms of support to overcome or minimize their learning barriers.

In other countries, the support given to learners with serious barriers to learning includes the adaptation of classroom space, teacher support, differentiation of curriculum and assessment, and special education (Agrawal et al., 2019). Many schools want to work with or rely on special schools for their seriously struggling learners. In Scotland, special and mainstream schools co-exist for the holistic development of struggling learners to realise their fullest potential (Agrawal, et al., 2019). In Mexico, the government provides separate educational facilities for children with special needs which are used to prepare learners for future inclusion in mainstream classrooms when that option becomes available.

However, as some school B participants argue, the problem with the South African progression policy is that it tries to be as inclusive as possible and does not intersect easily with special schools nor does it facilitate the process by which certain struggling learners (especially at their early stages of schooling) should move from mainstream to special schools. One could argue that the South African education system and its employees are rather rigid and bureaucratic and not empowered with the capacity to remediate challenges faced by many struggling progressed learners (Westaway, 2019).

South Africa has many education policies that are borrowed from other (often developed) countries and yet some policies either go against others or do not match the dynamics on the ground in South Africa for their smooth implementation Makhanya, 2021; Mogale & Malatji, 2023). The progression policy is not well supported. Other DBE policies do not encourage struggling learners to push themselves and excel because of the low minimum pass mark required in different subjects. The policy also needs proper support interventions at various levels.

A ‘capability’ study conducted by Munje & Maarman (2016) in South Africa reveals that struggling learners are not well supported in schools to prepare them for the academic challenges that await them in the grades that they are progressing to. The support programmes that exist in more developed education systems are not many or robust enough in South Africa, as will be explained later. Hess (2020) concurs that many educational policies, such as the progression policy and others, are often formulated with minimal regard for the many dysfunctional educational and school processes on the ground.

Interestingly, despite these difficulties with the progression policy, most teachers’ and staff's perceptions are somehow positive towards the policy, even if they believe that there are important policy implementation challenges that will prevent the policy from achieving its aims. These findings confirm what Spillane, Reiser & Reimer (2002) argue, namely that teachers try to make sense of the policy rather than reject it because they want to resist change. The interpretive approach to policy analysis emphasizes the need to understand how teachers make meaning of the policy in their context (Mogale & Malatji, 2023).

The fact that secondary school A participants and some primary school B participants have different views about the progression policy can partly be explained by their different contexts. This is because school A differs from school B, in terms of their context and their circumstances. School A has a better context for policy implementation with its resources, older learners who are expected to be more responsible for their learning, and a better performance outcome due to the availability of intervention classes amongst others. Whilst school B faces heightened contextual issues like overcrowded classes, immature learners who cannot necessarily take responsibility for their learning, lack of parental support, the persuasion of progressing learners despite their knowledge gaps and poor grades by the DBE, and lack of training and the reluctance of the department to assess which early grade learners need referral to special schools.

5.4. Theme three: The implementation challenges encountered by the teaching staff in their classroom regarding learner progression.

This research study found many policy implementation challenges at the level of learners, schools, and the education system. Most participants mentioned the increased number of progressed learners, many of whom have poor attitudes, work ethics, serious knowledge gaps, and little commitment and ambition for their future. Teacher-based challenges include extra teacher planning or admin duties, and lack of teacher training, which demotivate some teachers. School factors include overcrowded classrooms, lack of resources, inadequate teacher support interventions, and challenges from district directives.

The findings also revealed that the quintile two secondary school A faces fewer challenges with their learners compared to the quintile four primary school B. School A identified principally the lack of effective teacher training and support from the DBE to assist with the policy implementation. Teachers face the challenges of a high work overload with large classes, a demanding curriculum, and catering to the needs of different struggling learners. Many of their learners suffer from major content or knowledge gaps especially since they have continuously progressed to another grade without having their barriers addressed or supported by adequate interventions. From an interpretive perspective, the factor of having to teach a demanding curriculum together with the work overload and especially the lack of adequate skills and training makes it an added policy implementation challenge for teachers. If teachers feel that they are unprepared or ill-equipped to implement a policy as a result of the lack of training, they will significantly be struggling more to implement policy.

The primary school B faces other important challenges which include additional teacher planning, learners' attitudes towards being progressed, lack of learner commitment, discipline, and interest in working hard and improving their academic performance, which were not as prominently mentioned by school A. These multiple challenges create unruly behaviour in progressed learners within classes, poor teacher morale, and frustration from teaching progressed learners who do not understand basic concepts from previous grades.

The difference between the challenges of the two schools could be because primary school B has younger (often immature) learners who need to be constantly pushed, stimulated, and controlled to perform. However, secondary school A learners, who are also difficult to discipline with negative attitudes and work ethic, may face internal and external pressures to be more responsible for their learning and complete their schooling (Yıldız & Kızıltaş, 2018). Hence, primary school B seems to struggle the most with learners, their behaviour, and their progress throughout schooling compared to secondary school A. As a result, from an interpretive perspective, one could argue that the implementation of the progression policy in school B is an added challenge to their already challenging school situation.

These findings are echoed by other studies. Munje and Maarman (2016) mention learner under-preparedness and Brahmbatt emphasizes the poor teacher support. Other studies add other challenges: Ramputla (2020) the lack of quality trained teachers, Stott et al (2015) the lack of resources, Mogale and Modipane (2021) insufficient consultation between and with teachers, parents, and learners, and Mogale, Malatji, and Mphahlele (2021) a lack of curriculum support. No South African studies argue that socio-economic factors were the main factors that made the policy implementation more difficult.

These challenges encourage the different policy actors to argue that the policy intentions are difficult to achieve. This may explain why many policy actors blame one another, especially in school B whereby many teachers blame the upper-level management (HODs, principals and the SBST) for the lack of monitoring and support required for the policy to be effectively implemented; they also blame the education system for not training and supporting them effectively while encouraging learners to be lazy with the low required pass rates. The upper-level school management also blames some teachers whom they perceive as preferring to work in their own isolated teaching spaces and not being prepared to collaborate and seek explicit support from the SBST members.

Many participants in both schools mentioned that, despite the many implementation challenges, they are keen on alleviating them by interpreting the policy as well as they can in their contexts. The participants in primary school B seem to make meaning of the policy and its implementation through staff meetings, internal

workshops, sharing ideas about how to intervene and support struggling progressed learners through intervention strategies, and discussions about policy implementation strategies. From an interpretive perspective, it means that despite school B's teachers facing overcrowded classes, lack of resources, lack of training, poor functionality of the SBST, and lack of parental involvement, some teachers still attempt to improvise and find a way to implement the learner progression policy.

Staying with the interpretive perspective, this would mean that teachers are willing to implement the policy because of their willpower to make a vital difference in learners' lives and their commitment to the teaching profession despite their circumstances that may hinder them in doing so, (like that of work overload, overcrowded classes, administrative duties amongst others). Therefore, factors such as values, beliefs, best practices, and commitment to the teaching profession and their learners enable them to push beyond the call of duty for successful policy implementation.

This echoes Mogale and Malatji (2023) who emphasize the existence of many social constructs through which meaning-making takes place. Teachers in secondary school A tried to go the extra mile to assist struggling progressed learners by working in collaboration with other staff members but without getting the results and support needed from the district. Hence, from an interpretive perspective, even if school A has better resources and the availability of technological support to assist struggling learners, the lack of support by the district causes a hindrance in their successful policy implementation. This makes one come back to the point mentioned previously on whether the better-equipped or funded school would have better interventions and policy implementation strategies.

From this study, it can be said that the better-funded/resourced school A does indeed have better interventions for learners with barriers and the implementation of the learner progression policy However, the lack of support from the district is still hindering it. Therefore, from an interpretive perspective, the availability of more funds and resources would not only make the conducting of interventions and support for struggling learners easier but it would also have a better impact on the meaning-making and implementation of policy.

With so many implementation challenges, one can understand the argument of Bayeni and Bhengu (2018) that principals are selective in the way they implement policies in their schools as these are fraught with complexities and challenges on the ground. This reinforces and is part of the argument of the interpretive policy analysis which explains the gap between policy and policy implementation coming from the way policy actors make meaning and interpret the policy in their context.

Despite the many challenges, very few participants argue that the policy should be withdrawn or amended. Instead, they call for better support interventions coming from the district and SBST to monitor and support teachers in the schools and their classrooms. According to Mogale and Malatji (2023), better and clearer implementation procedures, support processes, and monitoring are needed to bridge the gap that exists among and between teachers, SBST, and the district so they can find some common ground in developing more effective policy implementation strategies in their specific contexts.

5.5. Theme four: The response and support teachers use and need to support the struggling learners.

This study found that teachers and staff are faced with multiple difficulties in the support they get to assist the progressed learners. Ideally, the support should be directed at meeting both the teacher's and learner's needs.

Participants mentioned teacher-based interventions such as better teacher training by the district, teacher collaboration through PLCs, as well as adequate interventions or support programmes (which can include NGOs) to assist teachers in building learners' self-esteem and confidence in working for and achieving better academic results at school. However, the teaching staff feel frustrated when implementing the policy because of the overwhelming efforts they put into helping progressed learners which often go unnoticed, and because of the lack of adequate support or intervention from the SBST and district. Brahmbatt (2020) confirms this study's findings that teachers make some efforts to interpret the aims and objectives of the progression policy as best as they can, but they face different problems in developing or receiving effective classroom-based support strategies for struggling progressed learners. They are willing to attend professional development workshops

to develop classroom-based interventions to assist struggling progressed learners, but the district does not effectively provide such support.

The literature goes further than the study findings and the perceptions of the teaching staff because the latter don't sufficiently refer to the nature and role of different pedagogies. Engelbrecht et al. (2013) advocate for scaffolding and content re-teaching as effective strategies to support learners in class. Scaffolding is when the teacher or a peer gives a specific learner individualised guidance and assistance to complete activities or tasks in the class which could progressively enable the learners to become independent from supervision over time. Content re-teaching is often led by a post-instructional method of teaching whereby teachers help learners who did not grasp or understand content material, ideas, or processes from the initial teaching and learning activities; this is a method to get learners to engage and participate in activities that they did not initially understand (Bellert, 2015).

Participants also mentioned the need for school-based interventions such as weekend support classes, one-on-one classroom-based teacher-to-learner interactions, and extra lessons after school. School B participants mentioned that the DBE pushes the progression of struggling learners even if the necessary and proper support is not provided for these learners. This is not necessarily the same for School A. As such school A participants not only implement consequences for learners who produce poor results but also have many more intervention or support classes for struggling underperforming learners than school B. This gives school A, a presumably better learner performance outcome than school B. Yet, progressed learners need to be provided with the best school support through expert teachers and an abundance of resources that target the learners' cognitive levels and knowledge gaps (Darling-Hammond, 2009; Mapolisa, 2014 & Moagi, 2020, as cited by Ngema & Maphalala, 2021).

Other school-based measures that need to be contemplated, according to the secondary school A more than the primary school B, are warning to learners that they will face the consequences of their failure (progression should have consequences attached to it if they do not produce results) and that there should be enforcement of the threat effect linked to promotion, as argued by Stott et al. (2015). If none of the measures above work, then learners should be made to repeat until

they achieve the minimum grade requirements. This rarely happens according to the participants and yet countries, such as Denmark, Sweden, Japan, Korea, the United Kingdom, and Finland do retain certain struggling learners when it is clear that they will not benefit from being progressed.

Beyond the school level, participants from School B more than School A mentioned that the education system and especially districts should facilitate faster referral processes for seriously struggling learners towards remedial schools and the promotion of healthier parent-to-child and parent-to-school relationships. After all, school B's participants feel that learners at the primary school level need to have stronger foundational skills and use this to make something out of their future lives instead of remaining in mainstream schools, entering secondary schools, and ending up as dropouts because they would not only have too many knowledge gaps, but they would also lack the ability to academically excel.

Given the different levels at which support interventions can be targeted, there is a need for the different stakeholders to work together and collaborate. Yet, the study reveals that School B suffers more than School A from a lack of consultation and collaboration amongst school stakeholders when it comes to how to best support progressed learners. As such, the interpretive policy approach notes that this lack of consultation and collaboration is problematic because it contributes to more misinterpretation of what is needed to improve the progression of policy implementation.

As Lukman, Gobingca, and Issah (2022) argue, too often stakeholders believe that their approach to policy implementation is accurate and correct when, in actual sense, it is far from being effective because they misinterpret it in their difficult contexts, something that the interpretive policy analysis emphasizes. This can be alleviated by workshops and training sessions on how to empower stakeholders to be more receptive to change and work for more effective implementation of a policy (Lukman, Gobingca & Issah, 2022).

To sum up, there are many support interventions that the different stakeholders can utilise to assist struggling progressed learners. This study, however, shows that most participants are not necessarily aware of the range of support interventions available

conceptually and empirically but that they must work together to decide on implementation strategies that take account of their context. However, an international research study, conducted by Beatson, Quach, Canterford, Farrow, Bagnall, Hockey, Phillips, Patton, Olsson, Ride, Brown, Roy, and Mundy (2023) warns that it is not so clear which programs and support interventions are the most efficacious to be used by policymakers, education officials and practitioners to alleviate learners' barriers, improve learners' socio-emotional needs and academic outcomes.

5.6. Theme five: Monitoring and support of the learner progression policy by the SBST and the district.

The policy mentions the need for the SBST and DBST to guide and support teachers in addressing the challenges of progressing struggling learners. The SBST has the responsibility of liaising with the district management, staff, and other related providers of service (such as health professionals, educational psychologists, community-based support organisations, and other governmental departments) to identify and meet the needs of teachers and their institutions (Brahmbatt, 2020; Mkwanazi, 2023, Maphumulo, 2019). The DBST comes in when the teachers have exhausted all other avenues of support, which include interactions with the parents and the SBST.

The first problem that is emerging in the two schools has to do with the district's interpretation of the policy itself. Teachers accuse the district of pressurizing schools to progress too many struggling learners, even though the policy allows learners with academic barriers to be kept behind at least once in a phase. The other policy component that is often ignored is that some struggling learners should be tested and referred to remedial schools.

The study also reveals a poor understanding by most stakeholders of what is meant by effective support for progressing learners with serious knowledge gaps. The teachers agree that the monitoring and support of the SBST and DBST is poor. The secondary school A participants accused the SBST and the DBST of not assuming their responsibilities and supporting roles. The teachers explained that they are willing to do whatever it takes to support learners, but that the SBST needs to assist

them. They argue that the principal and the SBST do not know how to monitor the policy and lack knowledge about the kinds of support interventions needed for struggling progressed learners.

Teachers criticize the DBST workshops for not focusing on strategies on how to implement the progression policy in schools and classrooms because the workshops focus rather on curriculum coverage and assessments. They also mentioned that the DBST responds very slowly to the teachers' challenges on the ground and doesn't assist in a supportive manner. As the interpretive perspective would analyse, the lack of knowledge by the SBST would mean the lack of support given to teachers for policy implementation.

As mentioned earlier the SBST would only implement what they are knowledgeable about, which in the case of this study is limited because of its shortcomings as well as those on the DBST side. If the SBST lacks the understanding, they would in turn give limited support to teachers, which would mean teachers would not implement the policy as expected. So, if the implementers of the policy, the teachers, and the SBST on the ground, don't have enough knowledge, they will not be able to make enough good sense of the policy.

School B teachers agree with school A teachers in strongly blaming the SBST and DBST for not giving them meaningful support through effective workshops or constant feedback. In that sense, the study confirms what Munje and Maarman (2016) argue about the SBST and the DBST being unable to support and monitor effectively what happens or should happen with progressed learners. This problematic support and lack of monitoring may contribute to teacher's continued work in isolation and lack of collaboration. From an interpretive perspective, this is a major setback to the successful implementation of the progression policy because when teachers work in isolation, it would mean perhaps some teachers lack knowledge and continue not enhancing their knowledge or have teachers who know better holding onto their knowledge without sharing ideas with others on how to implement the policy. From a cognitive perspective, teachers would implement what they understand and therefore, a lack of knowledge base will hinder this implementation.

The many different reasons for this poor functionality and support of the SBSTs and DBSTs were not identified in this study but were in other South African literature. Motitswe (2014) mentions that SBSTs lack the necessary skills to perform their duties and support adequately the teachers. Makhalemele and Tlale (2021) blame an unconducive school culture that does not facilitate learner support because the SBSTs struggle to arrange meetings with teachers to discuss strategies. The SBSTs are often challenged by the lack of teacher collaboration and the lack of coordination between educational psychologists and teachers. Mkwanazi (2023) argues that the SBSTs are also ineffective because they receive very little assistance from the DBST.

The DBSTs have their own challenges. Apart from insufficient financial resources (to do regular school visits), Conway (2017) argues that the DBSTs are ill-equipped and poorly trained to design strategic support interventions for struggling learners. Makhalemele and Nel (2016) confirm that the DBSTs in South Africa are under-resourced with a shortage of employees with adequate skills and knowledge to provide support to schools and teachers in general and especially in assisting with progressed learners. The DBST workshops or seminars don't assist teachers with effective support interventions because the district is not equipped to deal with curriculum support-related difficulties, let alone with struggling progressed learners (Makhalemele & Tiale, 2021; Nkambule & Amsterdam, 2018).

This is viewed as a serious obstruction to policy implementation due to the contradictions in what the department provides compared to the policy expectations. From an interpretive perspective, the lack of monitoring by the DBST would in a way put teachers in a 'relaxed mode' when it comes to policy implementation. This would mean for some stakeholders (teachers and the SBST) that, if there is a lack of monitoring by the district, there would be an unnecessary need or urge by teachers to policy implementation on the ground because there aren't any strict measures in place to check if the policy is implemented or not. Hence, teachers would use this as a reason for not implementing effectively the policy.

The interesting difference between the two schools is that the HODs and principals of School B are adamant that there is sufficient support given by the SBST and the DBST, arguing instead that it is the teachers who prefer to remain isolated and do

their own things. School B, which appears less cohesive than School A, uses differently the ‘blame game’ as the principals and HODs blame more the teachers and prefer to protect the SBST and DBST which will not build collaboration and trust with the teachers. Walton & Lloyd (2012) attest that teachers and other stakeholders should collaborate with the SBST for effective support and the minimization of the blame game.

The interpretive policy approach used by this study reveals that there is an uncertain or not common understanding by stakeholders of what is meant by supporting progressed learners who have serious knowledge gaps. Stakeholders in and outside of the schools should work together to develop a positive meaning of the policy and its implementation so that the education system and its learners can benefit. As Grin and Loeber (2017) argue, it is incumbent on all policy actors, whether affiliated with the formal government or not, to be involved and have an active role in policy meaning-making, with creative thought and action to solve or minimize the implementation problems of such policy.

Mpanza and Govender (2022) in their South African study recommend management-related mechanisms to overcome or minimize these policy implementation issues. They argue that the SMTs and teachers should work together to gather information about learner-learning barriers, have workshops on how these can be alleviated, actively review and adapt the support plans, collaborate and share new teaching methodologies to assist weak learners, and monitor these support intervention programmes. The SGB should also be mobilised in advocacy sessions so that parents come on board and collaborate with the stakeholders of the school and are more involved in assisting their struggling children.

Other South African authors go further and recommend the need for donations from organisations and companies to assist in the upgrades of poorly maintained schools, as well as a focus on the SBSTs to check if their roles and functions are on par and aligned with current education structures and systems (Maree, Condy & Meda, 2023; Mwoma & Pillay, 2016).

Southern African studies identify other suggestions on the way forward. Rampana (2015) and Zwane (2016) confirm that effective support by the SBST and the DBST

is essential to implement the progression policy in practice. Rampana (2015) argues that, if Botswana's secondary schools must improve the efficiency of the support of struggling learners, stakeholders should learn from other better-performing mainstream schools and other countries that have successfully implemented the progression policy with effective support interventions. She adds that the DBST and the human resources department should train and improve teachers' attitudes towards learners with learning barriers (Rampana, 2015).

Zwane (2016) in his Swazi study argues that teachers and the SBSTs should receive training in mobilizing more resources and learning materials, working out the pace and style of teaching as well as strategies to adapt the curriculum for learners with learning barriers. The in-service training and professional development of all school stakeholders should be conducted by education specialists, and expert district officials as the more knowledge gained by stakeholders, the more confident they will become in dealing with issues surrounding learning barriers (Zwane, 2016).

The DBST should provide reviews to their relevant structures and the Department of Basic Education (DBE) about the lack of policy implementation at the ground level. This would create awareness by the DBE that they need to consult with the DBST and SBST when reviewing or designing policies. This would enable the design of policies to fit the real-life situation and current structures found within the reality of schools (Mpanza & Govender, 2022). It should use the help of Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and other government departments interested in assisting teachers in addressing learning barriers (Naholo, 2020; Mpanza & Govender, 2022).

Teacher support assistants should be used to help teachers conduct interventions for these struggling learners during the school day. According to Tapala, Niekerk & Mentz (2021) and Mpanza & Govender (2022), the DBE needs to find the resources to train the SBST and teachers with the required skills to adapt the curriculum and assessments to meet the needs of struggling learners. It could exempt SBST members from performing some duties (like teaching a whole day's timetable of classes like a teacher would) to focus on compiling struggling learners' profiles, and support interventions. Finally, it should employ competent DBST staff to respond to teachers' referrals swiftly and effectively as well as mobilize educational specialists to render if possible pro-bono specialist services for these learners.

5.7. Recommendations

The recommendations must be taken for what they are as they only emerge from the result of a small case study research of two schools. This study can therefore only suggest trends on the progression policy implementation and its strategies to assist progressed learners' learning barriers, but it can recommend what needs to be researched further.

One of the prerequisites for a better progression policy implementation that is often not there is for early-grade teachers to identify struggling learners as early as grade R so that these learners can be assisted at the early stages of their schooling career (Coetzee, 2008). Once assisted at the foundational phase, they may build confidence in purposeful learning from a young age and can be rewarded through the incentive approach which encourages good behaviour through positive affirmations and motivates them to go beyond the standards of gaining confidence and good behaviour. This means that teachers are likely to struggle less when learners reach higher grade levels, and they will feel stimulated and more confident to work well. Also, these early-grade teachers should be assisted in teaching learners how to build foundational knowledge of learners from an early stage of their schooling. This can be done by approaching top-performing primary schools and using their success strategies to help underperforming schools or schools that have heightened learner barriers (Meudi et al., 2021).

5.7.1. Broad Recommendations

Given that there are a few teachers who view the progression policy negatively as they believe that its implementation causes more harm than good for teachers and learners, there should be some recommendations that could minimize these negative attitudes and assist with better and more effective policy implementation. It should not be a question of removing the policy but of looking at how to better implement it within schools through more effective interventions, mechanisms, and strategies coming from and targeting different levels.

One of the most important points of entry is more and better training of teachers to effectively implement the progression policy and attend to the needs of struggling learners. This is likely to strengthen teachers' views about the advantages of the

learner progression policy and how to implement it better. The most important teacher support should encourage teachers to work in collaboration with other stakeholders and not work in isolation. This is why well-equipped SBST and DBST, remedial classes, the coming on board of educational specialists, the collaboration amongst teachers, and better school resources are all key in empowering teachers to assist progressed learners with the necessary support required.

Teachers should be assisted and workshopped on grade- or phase-specific methods to deal with struggling learners through better teaching strategies. Teachers' training and workshops need to build their knowledge capacity to vary and adjust their teaching methods to accommodate different learners' barriers and learning styles and assist those who have serious knowledge gaps.

The SBSTs and DBSTs should provide more effective support with teacher professional development about differentiated teaching and assessment methods for different phases and grades. The study reveals that the SBST and DBST members must work collectively to assist teachers with adequate intervention strategies even if teachers know best their learners' barriers. They should also be accountable and transparent in their monitoring processes, especially when dealing with the referral of some struggling learners to remedial schools which should be done swiftly and timeously. Nkosi and Adebayo (2021) recommend that, for senior and FET learners, the district conducts Saturday classes, holiday programs as well and boot camps so that these struggling learners learn to take pride and put effort into attending these classes.

Another supportive intervention for teachers is to gain the knowledge and skills of how to deal with learners' learning barriers by collaborating with education psychologists and understanding better the potential and limitations of special schools for certain kinds of learners who are awaiting referrals and placements.

Teachers often operate in poor school environments and require more material and human resources. For example, teacher assistants could assist in monitoring and helping learners at risk of failure in their classes by giving them individualised attention which will allow the teachers to focus on the better-performing learners with extension activities. This could contribute to better disciplined controlled classes

where both fast and struggling learners complete their in-class activities at their pace. More schools need to have access to education specialists and social workers who can assist learners with learning barriers.

Another important factor that needs to be attended to is parental involvement in getting struggling learners to work hard and develop positive attitudes toward learning at school. Parents should have healthier relationships with the school and get involved by being provided with workshops on how to support their children at home. To assist learners with enhanced reading skills, parents and the SGBs should be made aware by the schools of the value of reading clubs, reading, and literacy programmes, such as spelling bee competitions, the annual literacy passport programme, and the Nalibali reading programmes (Bloch, 2015). These will not only help learners enhance their language and reading skills but also allow SGB members who are parents of children to attend such programmes. Such platforms can strengthen family bonds as well as make learning interactive for the learners and parents which may assist with the lack of parental control and involvement issue.

Finally, progressed learners must be made aware that success in support interventions does not come solely from the efforts of their teachers but also from them. They should be made aware that they may face consequences if they do not work hard and perform well academically when allowed to progress (without meeting the minimum pass requirements). This can be done by practicing the ‘threat effect’ (Stott et al., 2015) on learners which is about ensuring that lack of good behaviour, and poor academic performance may lead to failure and that the learners should repeat grades until they are willing and committed to learn and pass solely through their own aided hard work.

Therefore, what is mostly recommended is the commitment by all stakeholders, including SGB members to work together, avoid blaming one another and provide adequate support by being all trained on this issue. A change of mindsets and different funded actions/strategies will result in a more effective implementation of the learner progression for the benefit of all.

5.7.2 Recommendations for further research

Having conducted this small-scale study of two schools and reviewed the South African and international studies on the learner progression policy and the needed support interventions, the following are recommendations for further studies.

- an in-depth study on the knowledge gaps teachers of primary and secondary schools have and how pre- or in-service teacher training can improve their curriculum to better equip teachers to deal with learners with learning barriers.
- a comparative study between schools in other parts of South Africa to understand their diverse implementation strategies to assist teachers and other stakeholders struggling with policy implementation and support strategies.
- a comparative study about intervention programmes or systems used in primary schools vs secondary schools in South Africa.
- A study of how DBSTs view the progression policy in schools and how they can be mobilised to ensure that this progression policy is better implemented and monitored.
- a comparative study between mainstream and remedial schools to understand the intervention strategies used in remedial schools that could be reproduced effectively in mainstream schooling.

5.8. Conclusion

This research study aimed to investigate and understand the teaching staff and principal's perceptions of the progression of policy, its implementation challenges, and how this affects teachers, learners, and the quality of teaching and learning. In addition, this study explored the intervention strategies to assist teachers and progressed learners with learning barriers at different levels.

The key finding about the progression policy itself is not to do away with it but to find viable strategies and solutions for a better implementation process at teacher, school, and district levels. These include more effective teacher support and training initiatives, a more manageable teacher workload, better school material, and human resources, and better monitoring of the policy implementation by the SBST and the DBST so the policy can be adapted in diverse school contexts.

The study reveals a lot of difficulties, frustration, and emotions among stakeholders when it comes to the implementation of the progression of policy and the academic and emotional performance of progressed learners. Teachers at the two selected schools complain about the support interventions they receive and their inadequate working relationship with the SBST and the DBST.

This study together with other South African and international literature points to many suggestions on how to assist better with effective training and workshopping of teachers, the SBST, the SGBs, and parents who should assist their children at home. There should be early identifications of struggling learners, better flexible curriculum, different pedagogical instruction and assessment, collaboration of all stakeholders as well as the need for swifter placements of learners with serious learning barriers in special schools. Another suggestion is that the progressed learners' tendency to misbehave and fail to work hard and perform better should be minimized by reinforcing the threat effect. The threat effect is referred efforts used to make learners scared or fearful of the consequences of failure due to ill-discipline, misbehaviour, inconsistency in academic performance, not working well or being effortless in completing tasks, and low achievement of results (Stott et al., 2015).

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: School of Education Ethics Clearance Certificate

Appendix B: GDE Research Approval Letter

Appendix C: Letter of Permission to conduct research at schools.

Appendix D: Information Sheet for Principal Participants

Appendix E: Information Sheet for Head of Department (HOD) Participants

Appendix F: Information Sheet for Educator Participants

Appendix G: Principal Participant Consent Form

Appendix H: Head of Department Participant Consent Form

Appendix I: Educator Participant Consent Form

Appendix J: Interview Schedule (Principals)

Appendix K: Interview Schedule for HODs

Appendix L: Interview Schedule for Educators

Appendix M: Turnitin Similarity Index or Score

Appendix A: School of Education Ethics Clearance Certificate

UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND, JOHANNESBURG | WSoE Wits School of Education

SCHOOL OF EDUCATION ETHICS COMMITTEE

CONSTITUTED UNDER THE UNIVERSITY HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (NON-MEDICAL)

CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE	**PROTOCOL NUMBER: 2023ECE016**
PROJECT TITLE	Implementation of the Learner Progression Policy: Provision and interventions in support of progressed learners within the Senior Phase: a case study of two Gauteng Public Schools.
INVESTIGATOR	**SULEMAN FARZAANA**
SCHOOL/DEPARTMENT OF INVESTIGATOR	Wits School of Education
DATE CONSIDERED	06-Mar-23
DECISION OF THE COMMITTEE	Approved unconditionally
RISK LEVEL	Minimal risk
EXPIRY DATE	Date of submission of the Research Report
ISSUE DATE OF CERTIFICATE	20-Mar-23
CHAIRPERSON	Dr. Batseba Mofolo-Mbokane

cc: Dr. Francine De Clercq

DECLARATION OF INVESTIGATOR

To be completed in duplicate and **ONE COPY** returned to the Chairperson of the School/Department ethics committee.

I fully understand the conditions under which I am are authorized to carry out the abovementioned research and I guarantee to ensure compliance with these conditions. Should any departure to be contemplated from the research procedure as approved I/we undertake to resubmit the protocol to the Committee.

Signature **Date** 13 / 04 / 2023

Appendix B: GDE Research Approval Letter

GAUTENG PROVINCE
Department: Education
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

8/4/4/1/2

GDE RESEARCH APPROVAL LETTER

Date:	**20 April 2023**
Validity of Research Approval:	**08 February 2023– 30 September 2023** **2023/138**
Name of Researcher:	**Suleman F**
Address of Researcher:	**07 Lismore Avenue**
	Crossyby
	Johannesburg
Telephone Number:	**084 714 8597**
Email address:	**kholvadiafarzaana@gmail.com**
Research Topic:	**Implementation of the Learner Progression Policy: Provision and interventions in support of progressed learners within the Senior Phase: a case study of two Gauteng Public Schools.**
Type of qualification	**Masters**
Number and type of schools:	**1 Primary School and 1 Secondary School**
District/s/HO	**Johannesburg North and Johannesburg West**

Re: Approval in Respect of Request to Conduct Research

This letter serves to indicate that approval is hereby granted to the above-mentioned researcher to proceed with research in respect of the study indicated above. The onus rests with the researcher to negotiate appropriate and relevant time schedules with the school/s and/or offices involved to conduct the research. A separate copy of this letter must be presented to both the School (both Principal and SGB) and the District/Head Office Senior Manager confirming that permission has been granted for the research to be conducted.

04/05/2023

The following conditions apply to GDE research. The researcher may proceed with the above study subject to the conditions listed below are met. Approval may be withdrawn should any of the conditions listed below be flouted:

Office of the Director: Education Research and Knowledge Management
7th Floor, 17 Simmonds Street, Johannesburg, 2001
Tel: (011) 355 0488
Email: Faith.Tshabalala@gauteng.gov.za
Website: www.education.gpg.gov.za

1. *The letter would indicate that the said researcher/s has/have been granted permission from the Gauteng Department of Education to conduct the research study.*
2. *The District/Head Office Senior Manager/s must be approached separately, and in writing, for permission to involve District/Head Office Officials in the project.*
3. ***Because of the relaxation of COVID 19 regulations researchers can collect data online, telephonically, physically access schools, or may make arrangements for Zoom with the school Principal. Requests for such arrangements should be submitted to the GDE Education Research and Knowledge Management directorate.***
4. ***The Researchers are advised to wear a mask at all times, Social distance at all times, Provide a vaccination certificate or negative COVID-19 test, not older than 72 hours, and Sanitise frequently.***
5. *A copy of this letter must be forwarded to the school principal and the chairperson of the School Governing Body (SGB) that would indicate that the researcher/s has been granted permission from the Gauteng Department of Education to conduct the research study.*
6. *A letter/document that outlines the purpose of the research and the anticipated outcomes of such research must be made available to the principals, SGBs, and District/Head Office Senior Managers of the schools and districts/offices concerned, respectively.*
7. *The Researcher will make every effort to obtain the goodwill and cooperation of all the GDE officials, principals, and chairpersons of the SGBs, teachers, and learners involved. Persons who offer their cooperation will not receive additional remuneration from the Department while those that opt not to participate will not be penalised in any way.*
8. *Research may only be conducted after school hours so that the normal school program is not interrupted. The Principal (if at a school) and/or Director (if at a district/head office) must be consulted about an appropriate time when the researcher/s may carry out their research at the sites that they manage.*
9. *Research may only commence from the second week of February and must be concluded before the beginning of the last quarter of the academic year. If incomplete, an amended Research Approval letter may be requested to conduct research in the following year.*
10. *Items 6 and 7 will not apply to any research effort being undertaken on behalf of the GDE. Such research will have been commissioned and be paid for by the Gauteng Department of Education.*
11. *It is the researcher's responsibility to obtain written parental consent of all learners that are expected to participate in the study.*
12. *The researcher is responsible for supplying and utilising his/her research resources, such as stationery, photocopies, transport, faxes, and telephones, and should not depend on the goodwill of the institutions and/or the offices visited for supplying such resources.*
13. *The names of the GDE officials, schools, principals, parents, teachers, and learners that participate in the study may not appear in the research report without the written consent of each of these individuals and/or organisations.*
14. *On completion of the study, the researcher/s must supply the Director: Knowledge Management & Research with one Hard Cover bound and an electronic copy of the research.*
15. *The researcher may be expected to provide short presentations on the purpose, findings, and recommendations of his/her research to both GDE officials and the schools concerned.*
16. *Should the researcher have been involved with research at a school and/or a district/head office level, the Director concerned must also be supplied with a summary of the purpose, findings, and recommendations of the research study.*

The Gauteng Department of Education wishes you well in this important undertaking and looks forward to examining the findings of your research study.

Kind regards

.....

Dr. Gumani Mukatuni
Acting CES: Education Research and Knowledge Management

DATE: 20/04/23

Office of the Director: Education Research and Knowledge Management
7th Floor, 17 Simmonds Street, Johannesburg, 2001
Tel: (011) 355 0488
Email: Faith.Tshabalala@gauteng.gov.za
Website: www.education.gpg.gov.za

Appendix C: Letter of Permission to conduct research at schools.

School of Education,

Faculty of Humanities (0117173007)

Principal

30 January 2023

Dear Sir/Madam,

Re: Permission to conduct research at

……

My name is Farzaana Suleman. I am a student, studying towards a Master's Degree in Education in the School of Education at the University of the Witwatersrand. I am seeking permission to do research at Wiseman Cele Secondary School.

I am conducting research on **the implementation of the learner progression policy**.

The reason for embarking on this research study is to understand the learning barriers of underperforming/progressed learners, educator challenges when dealing with progressed learners, and the implementation of the learner progression policy at the institution as well as the possible strategies or interventions that educators may use to overcome progressed learner learning barriers. The research will entail collecting data from principals, heads of departments (HODs), educators and learners.

I will invite the above-mentioned individuals from your institution to participate in this study. If they agree, they will be asked to be interviewed for approximately **45 minutes** of their time. The data collection would preferably be conducted on the school premises after work hours or via an online meetings portal. The participants' permission will be needed for data collection through **voice/audio recordings**.

Participants will be asked to give their written or verbal consent before the research begins. Their responses will be treated confidentially, and identities (names and the

name of the institution) will be anonymous unless otherwise expressly indicated. Individual privacy will be maintained in all published and written data resulting from the study. The results will be communicated in the form of a research report and made available upon request by the institution.

The research participants will not be advantaged or disadvantaged in any way. They will be reassured that they can withdraw their permission during this project without penalty. There are no foreseeable risks in participating in this study. If a participant feels uncomfortable during the data collection process, the participant is welcome to remove him or herself from the process without any penalties. The participants will not be paid for this study.

All research data will be stored on a device with an encrypted password for 1 year and/or deleted or destroyed after 3 years. Only the researcher will have access to the data.

I, therefore, request permission in writing to conduct my research at your institution. The permission letter should if possible be on your institution's headed paper, signed and dated, and specifically referring to me by name with the title of my study.

Please let me know if you require any further information. I look forward to your response as soon as is convenient.

Yours sincerely,

Researcher:

Miss Farzaana Suleman

0847148597

719173@students.wits.ac.za

Supervisor:

Dr. Francine De Clercq

Appendix D: Information Sheet for Principal Participants

Information Sheet for Principal Participants

Dear Sir/Madam

My name is Farzaana Suleman. I am a Part-Time Master's student in my second year of study at the School of Education, University of the Witwatersrand, Parktown in Johannesburg. My supervisor is Dr. Francine De Clercq. I am conducting a research study about the Implementation of the Learner Progression Policy. The study title is ***Implementation of the Learner Progression Policy: Provision and Interventions in Support of Progressed Learners within the Senior Phase: A Case Study of two Gauteng Public Schools.***

I am inviting you to take part in an interview and questionnaire completion session. If you decide to take part, your participation in this research study will last about 30 to 45 minutes. The interview activity will take place at the institution where the participant is located at an appropriate time outside working hours.

I would like to voice/audio record the interview with your permission. This data will be stored on a device with an encrypted password for 1 year and/or deleted after 3 years. Only the researcher will have access to the data.

During the research activity, I would need to ask for some personal information about you, including your experience with the respective policy implementation that is being researched but the interview will be confidential. When I share the results of the research study, I will not include your name or anything else that could identify you and your institution. With your permission, I may use the data collected from this research study, but your name and any personal information will not be used or passed on.

If you decide to take part in the research study, it should be because you want to volunteer. You can stop being in the study at any given time. You do not have to answer any questions if you do not feel comfortable doing so. You will not get any

direct benefits if you choose to join the research study. Taking part in the research study will not cost you anything nor will you be paid for being in this research study.

The risks for this research study are no more than what happens in everyday teaching and learning. If at any moment you may feel upset about the interview questions you may stop the interview and continue at another time.

This research study will be written up as a research report. If you would like to receive a summary of this report, I will gladly schedule a meeting or send you an email to share the outcome of my research.

If you have any questions during or afterwards about this research study, feel free to contact me or my supervisor at the details listed below. If you have any concerns or complaints about the ethical procedures of this research study, you are welcome to contact the University Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-Medical), by telephone at +27(0) 11 717 1408, or by email hrecnon-medical@wits.ac.za.

Yours sincerely

Researcher:

Farzaana Suleman,

0847148597

719173@students.wits.ac.za

Supervisor:

Dr. Francine De Clercq

Information Sheet for Head of Department (HOD) Participants

Dear Sir/Madam

My name is Farzaana Suleman. I am a Part-Time Master's student in my second year of study at the School of Education, University of the Witwatersrand, Parktown in Johannesburg. My supervisor is Dr. Francine De Clercq. I am conducting a research study about the Implementation of the Learner Progression Policy. The study title is ***Implementation of the Learner Progression Policy: Provision and Interventions in Support of Progressed Learners within the Senior Phase: A Case Study of two Gauteng Public Schools.***

I am inviting you to take part in an interview and questionnaire completion session. If you decide to take part, your participation in this research study will last about 30 to 45 minutes. The interview activity will take place at the institution where the participant is located at an appropriate time outside working hours.

I would like to voice/audio record the interview with your permission. This data will be stored on a device with an encrypted password for 1 year and/or deleted after 3 years. Only the researcher will have access to the data.

During the research activity, I would need to ask for some personal information about you, including your experience with the respective policy implementation that is being researched but the interview will be confidential. When I share the results of the research study, I will not include your name or anything else that could identify you and your institution. With your permission, I may use the data collected from this research study, but your name and any personal information will not be used or passed on.

If you decide to take part in the research study, it should be because you want to volunteer. You can stop being in the study at any given time. You do not have to answer any questions if you do not feel comfortable doing so. You will not get any

direct benefits if you choose to join the research study. Taking part in the research study will not cost you anything nor will you be paid for being in this research study.

The risks for this research study are no more than what happens in everyday teaching and learning. If at any moment, you may feel upset about the interview questions you may stop the interview and continue at another time.

This research study will be written up as a research report. If you would like to receive a summary of this report, I will gladly schedule a meeting or send you an email to share the outcome of my research.

If you have any questions during or afterwards about this research study, feel free to contact me or my supervisor at the details listed below. If you have any concerns or complaints about the ethical procedures of this research study, you are welcome to contact the University Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-Medical), by telephone at +27(0) 11 717 1408, or email at hrecnon-medical@wits.ac.za.

Yours sincerely

Researcher:

Farzaana Suleman,

0847148597

719173@students.wits.ac.za

Supervisor:

Dr. Francine De Clercq

Appendix F: Information Sheet for Educator Participants

Information Sheet Educator Participants

Dear Sir/Madam

My name is Farzaana Suleman. I am a Part-Time Master's student in my second year of study at the School of Education at the University of the Witwatersrand, Parktown in Johannesburg. My supervisor is Dr. Francine De Clercq. I am conducting a research study about the Implementation of the Learner Progression Policy. The study title is ***Implementation of the Learner Progression Policy: Provision and Interventions in Support of Progressed Learners within the Senior Phase: A Case Study of Two Gauteng Public Schools.***

I am inviting you to take part in an interview and questionnaire completion session. If you decide to take part, your participation in this research study will last about 30 to 45 minutes. The interview activity will take place at the institution where the participant is located at an appropriate time outside working hours.

I would like to voice/audio record the interview with your permission. This data will be stored on a device with an encrypted password for 1 year and/or deleted after 3 years. Only the researcher will have access to the data.

During the research activity, I would need to ask for some personal information about you, including your experience with the respective policy implementation that is being researched.

The interview will be confidential. When I share the results of the research study, I will not include your name or anything else that could identify you or your institution. With your permission, I may use the data collected from this research study, but your name and any personal information will not be used or passed on.

If you decide to take part in the research study, it should be because you want to volunteer. You can stop being in the study at any given time. You do not have to answer any questions if you do not feel comfortable doing so. You will not get any

direct benefits if you choose to join the research study. Taking part in the research study will not cost you anything nor will you be paid for being in this research study.

The risks for this research study are no more than what happens in everyday teaching and learning. If at any moment you may feel upset about the interview questions you may stop the interview and continue at another time.

This research study will be written up as a research report. If you would like to receive a summary of this report, I will gladly schedule a meeting to share the outcome of my research.

If you have any questions during or afterwards about this research study, feel free to contact me or my supervisor at the details listed below. If you have any concerns or complaints about the ethical procedures of this research study, you are welcome to contact the University Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-Medical), by telephone at +27(0) 11 717 1408, email hrecnon-medical@wits.ac.za.

Yours sincerely

Researcher:

Farzaana Suleman, 719173@students.wits.ac.za

0847148597

Supervisor:

Dr. Francine De Clercq

Appendix G: Principal Participant Consent Form

Principal

Participant Consent Form

Title of Research Project:

Implementation of the Learner Progression Policy: Provision and interventions in support of progressed learners within the Senior Phase: a case study of two Gauteng Public Schools

Name of Researcher: Miss Farzaana Suleman

I, the **Principal (A or B**) agree to participate in this research project.
I agree to the following:

(Please highlight or circle the relevant options below)

Criteria	Options	
1. The research study was explained to me. I understand what this study is about.	**YES**	**NO**
2. I understand that I can volunteer to take part in the study.	**YES**	**NO**
3. I agree that the interview may be audio recorded and that answers will be written out by the researcher.	**YES**	**NO**
4. I agree that direct quotations from my interview may be used by the researcher in her research report.	**YES**	**NO**
5. I agree that my participation will remain anonymous (my name will not be used by the researcher in her research report)	**YES**	**NO**
6. I agree that the researcher may use the information I provide in my interview (depending on their ethics clearance being obtained) but my name and any personal information will not be used or passed on	**YES**	**NO**
7. I understand that all research data will be stored on a device with an encrypted password for 1 year and/or deleted or destroyed after 3 years. Only the researcher will have access to the data.	**YES**	**NO**

Position of Participant:
……..

Date of completion: ……

Name of Researcher/person seeking consent:
……

Signature of Participant:
……

Appendix H: Head of Department Participant Consent Form

Head of Department

Participant Consent Form

Title of Research Project:

Implementation of the Learner Progression Policy: Provision and interventions in support of progressed learners within the Senior Phase: a case study of two Gauteng Public Schools

Name of Researcher: Miss Farzaana Suleman

I, the **Head of Department (A, B, C or D**) agree to participate in this research project.
I agree to the following:

(Please highlight or circle the relevant options below)

Criteria	Options	
1. The research study was explained to me. I understand what this study is about.	**YES**	**NO**
2. I understand that I can volunteer to take part in the study.	**YES**	**NO**
3. I agree that the interview may be audio recorded and that answers will be written out by the researcher.	**YES**	**NO**
4. I agree that direct quotations from my interview may be used by the researcher in her research report.	**YES**	**NO**
5. I agree that my participation will remain anonymous (my name will not be used by the researcher in her research report)	**YES**	**NO**
6. I agree that the researcher may use the information I provide in my interview (depending on their ethics clearance being obtained) but my name and any personal information will not be used or passed on	**YES**	**NO**
7. I understand that all research data will be stored on a device with an encrypted password for 1 year and/or deleted or destroyed after 3 years. Only the researcher will have access to the data.	**YES**	**NO**

Position of Participant:
……..

Date of completion: ……

Name of Researcher/person seeking consent:
……

Signature of Participant:
……

Appendix I: Educator Participant Consent Form

Educator Participant Consent Form

Title of Research Project:

Implementation of the Learner Progression Policy: Provision and interventions in support of progressed learners within the Senior Phase: a case study of two Gauteng Public Schools

Name of Researcher: Miss Farzaana Suleman

I, ……,
agree to participate in this research project.
I agree to the following:

(Please highlight or circle the relevant options below)

Criteria	Options	
1. The research study was explained to me. I understand what this study is about.	**YES**	**NO**
2. I understand that I can volunteer to take part in the study.	**YES**	**NO**
3. I agree that the interview may be audio recorded or answers manually written out by my researcher.	**YES**	**NO**
4. I agree that direct quotations from my interview may be used by the researcher in her research report.	**YES**	**NO**
5. I agree that my participation will remain anonymous (my name will not be used by the researcher in her research report)	**YES**	**NO**
6. I agree that the researcher may use the information I provide in my interview (depending on their own ethics clearance being obtained) but my name and any personal information will not be used or passed on	**YES**	**NO**
7. I understand that all research data will be stored on a device with an encrypted password for 1 year and/or deleted or destroyed after 3 years. Only the researcher will have access to the data.	**YES**	**NO**

Signature of Participant:
……
Date of completion:
……

Name of Researcher/person seeking consent:
……
Signature of Participant:
……
Date of completion:
……

Appendix J: Interview Schedule (Principals)

Interview Schedule (Principals)

1. How long have you been a principal or teacher in the school sector?
2. Do you like your job? What is the most rewarding and difficult aspect of your job?
3. What do you think are the most important reasons for many learners to repeat a grade? What is the impact on the teachers?
4. What do you perceive are the causes of learner underachievement/struggles? Do these have more to do with emotional/personal, social, socio-economic, or schooling barriers or any other factors? Elaborate.
5. How does the school diagnose the learning barriers of struggling learners? Elaborate on how this diagnosis is followed up.
6. Can these barriers be remediated/alleviated in schools/by teachers/communities? (Emotional, social, socio-economic, schooling barriers or any other factors?) Elaborate.
7. What is expected from teachers and the school-based support team (SBST) about struggling learners?
8. What do you think about the policy of the progression of learners? What is its purpose? Do you agree with it? Is it appropriate? Explain.
9. What are the biggest challenges in implementing this policy in your Intermediate/Secondary phase?
10. What impact does the number of learners who progressed at your school without having reached the required knowledge of the grade have on the learners and the quality of teaching/learning for the teachers?
11. Can you share any other experiences about the learner progression policy? Elaborate on the harmful and positive attributes.
12. What do the school-based support team and educators do around the challenges and the implementation of the learner progression policy (school strategies)
13. What is done by the SBST to assist educators with the interpretation, meaning-making and adaptation to the learner progression policy for its implementation?
14. What is the role of the principal in assisting the SBST with the successful implementation of the policy?
15. How often are parent meetings held to discuss individual learner academic performance? What is therefore expected of parents regarding struggling learners?
16. Does the school develop an enhanced academic improvement plan for progressed learners who have not reached the required knowledge of the previous grade? How does this work?
17. What are the most effective and least effective support interventions or programmes that the school and the teachers adopt to assist struggling progressed learners?

18. How do you monitor the support interventions provided to progressed learners who struggle with the curriculum requirements? What have you noticed about the impact of these interventions?
19. What do you think could be better done by the DBE to assist in dealing with struggling progressed learners? Do you think there should be an alternative strategy or policy to the progression policy for struggling learners?
20. When a policy is introduced by the GDE level and then introduced at school, is there a strategy utilised at the school level in terms of understanding the policy at hand? (Meaning making e.g. meetings etc)
21. How does one make meaning of policy for its implementation at your school? How is a policy implemented at your school?
22. Are there regular meetings held in terms of discussions surrounding policy implementation at your school? By whom and when?
23. Do you think the SBST is adequately trained in policies for its implementation? If yes, how so? If not, what can be done better?
24. Do you think the learner progression policy is there to alleviate negative socio-economic issues or reproduce these (for example progression would lead to failure or not?)? Why do you say so?
25. What type of learning barriers do progress learners have?
26. Do you think the learner progression policy is doing justice to our learners or causing more harm?

Appendix K: Interview Schedule for HODs

Interview Schedule for HODs

1. How long have you been a HOD/Teacher and of which subjects?
2. Do you enjoy your job? What is the most rewarding and difficult in your job?
3. What are your major concerns behind why many learners are repeating their grades? What is its impact on school?
4. What do you think are the major causes behind learner struggles? Do these have more to do with emotional/personal, social, socio-economic, or schooling barriers or any other factors? Elaborate.
5. How do the educators at your school diagnose the learning barriers of their learners and what role do you play in this regard? How are these diagnoses followed up?
6. How do you think these learning barriers can be alleviated/by the educators/community? (given these can be related to Emotional, social, socio-economic, schooling barriers or any other factors?) Elaborate.
7. What is your perception about the learner progression policy and the impacts it has on the progressed learner (learner laziness, lack of work ethic?) Do you agree with the aim/purpose of the learner progression policy in South Africa?
8. What are the major challenges in the implementation of the learner progression policy at the intermediate/secondary phase level?
9. What impact does the number of learners who progressed at your school without having reached the required knowledge of the grade have on the learners and the quality of teaching/learning for the teachers?
10. Can you share any other experiences about the learner progression policy? Elaborate on the harmful or positive attributes.
11. As a school collective what do the SBST team do around the challenges surrounding the successful implementation of the learner progression policy?
12. How do HODs assist educators in the interpretation and meaning-making of the learner progression policy?
13. Do you think educational stakeholders should have a say during the development of policies by the DBE? Why do you say so?
14. What is the role of the principal in the successful implementation of the policy?
15. As part of the SBST what other necessary support programmes or structures (besides the existing ones) should be in place to assist struggling progressed learners or teachers?
16. How often are parents' meetings held to discuss learner progression/struggles or achievements of learners?
17. Can you describe any support programmes/interventions the school has to address progressed learner(s) learning needs?
18. What do you think can be done to improve struggling learner results better? (Other interventions?) What can the DBST (district) do to assist?
19. Do you think there should be an alternative policy to the progression policy? What changes should be made? Any recommendations/suggestions? Elaborate.

Appendix L: Interview Schedule for Educators

Interview Schedule for Educators

1. How long have you been an educator and which subject?
2. Do you like what you teach? What is the most rewarding and difficult in your job?
3. As an educator what do you think are significant reasons for many learners' grades repetition? What is its impact on the school?
4. What do you perceive are the major causes of learners struggling at school? Do they have more to do with social, emotional, academic, socio-economic and schooling barriers or any other factors? Elaborate.
5. How do you feel about progressed learners? Are they willing to improve their academic results?
6. How does the school diagnose the learning barriers of struggling learners? Elaborate on how this diagnosis is followed up Is there a school strategy that assists with the early identification of struggling learners?
7. How do you think these barriers can be remedied/alleviated in schools/by teachers? (given these can be related to emotional, social, socio-economic, schooling barriers or any other factors?) Elaborate.
8. What do you think about the policy of progression of learners? What is its purpose? Do you agree with it? Is it appropriate?
9. What are the challenges and impacts of the implementation of the learner progression policy in your intermediate/secondary phase?
10. What impact does the number of progressed learners in class have on educator personal planning, quality of teaching as well as on learners themselves?
11. How can these learner academic challenges be remedied or alleviated? What type of academic challenges do these progressed learners experience in the grade level(s) that they are not equipped for?
12. What kind of skills do teachers with struggling learners need to possess? Do you think as a teacher you have been equipped with this knowledge during your tertiary studies?
13. Can you share your personal experiences or challenges about the learner progression policy (Elaborate on the harmful or positive attributes)?
14. How does the SBST support educators to interpret, make meaning of and adapt to the learner progression policy?
15. As an educator and school collective what do the school-based support team do about the challenges around the implementation of the learner progression policy?
16. What do educators in each phase do about the learners' challenges and the policy's implementation?
17. What do you think is the role of the principal in assisting the SBST with the successful implementation of the policy?
18. How often are parents' meetings held to discuss individual learner academic performance or allow parents to view their learner books/scripts etc at school? What is expected of parents of struggling learners?

19. Does the school have an academic improvement plan specifically targeting progressed learners who possess learning gaps? How does this work?
20. As an Educator can you describe what forms of support interventions or support programmes are most effective and least effective in assisting progressed learners?
21. How are interventions and support programmes monitored? What have you noticed about the impact of these interventions on learner results?
22. How often are intervention activities conducted?
23. Do these activities yield better learning outcomes for struggling learners?
24. What do you think principals need to do to help combat learner progression and to address their academic needs?
25. Does the (DBST) district assist educators with intervention strategies or support programmes to assist struggling learners? If yes, what are these?
26. What other forms of additional assistance would be needed from the (DBST) district in support of underperforming learners? Do you think the progression policy drives learners to excel or not? Elaborate.
27. Do you think there should be an alternative to the progression policy for struggling learners?
28. What do you think the DBE can do better in assisting struggling progressed learners?

Appendix M: Turnitin Similarity Index or Score

