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#### Abstract

Progression is good for promoting learners from one stage to another and for career development. Secondary schools in Limpopo Province, South Africa, use progression. The study investigated the impact of progression on Grade 12 learners' performance in Capricorn District, South Africa. A phenomenological design was employed to identify the impact of the progression of learners. Study participants were purposively selected from three schools because they had valuable information regarding the impact of learners' progression on learning outcomes in Capricorn District. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, document analysis and focus group interviews. Data were analysed thematically. The results show that stakeholders' perceptions suggest that the progression of learners resulted in poor performance in Grade 12 final examinations in the study area. Teachers' lack of skills in dealing with academic challenges led to low pass rates. The findings have implications for the implementation of progression policies in secondary schools.

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**Review Article****Impact of Progression on Secondary Schools Learners' Performance in Limpopo Province, South Africa \***Molongwane Tonny CHIDI <sup>1</sup>  Elias Tsakane NGOBENI <sup>2</sup>  Percy SEPENG <sup>3</sup> **Abstract**

Progression is good for promoting learners from one stage to another and for career development. Secondary schools in Limpopo Province, South Africa, use progression. The study investigated the impact of progression on Grade 12 learners' performance in Capricorn District, South Africa. A phenomenological design was employed to identify the impact of the progression of learners. Study participants were purposively selected from three schools because they had valuable information regarding the impact of learners' progression on learning outcomes in Capricorn District. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, document analysis and focus group interviews. Data were analysed thematically. The results show that stakeholders' perceptions suggest that the progression of learners resulted in poor performance in Grade 12 final examinations in the study area. Teachers' lack of skills in dealing with academic challenges led to low pass rates. The findings have implications for the implementation of progression policies in secondary schools.

**Keywords:** Impact, progression, school pass rates, learners' performance and teaching

**1. INTRODUCTION**

Globally, students can be promoted from one low grade to the next high grade when they have not attained the required marks. The promotion is based on social factors like age and duration of study in the same grades or phases. In the Canadian and United States Education systems, such promotions are called social promotions (Zwaagstra et al., 2010). In Secondary's in Nigeria, where there are Junior Secondary Phase (JSP) and Secondary Senior Phases (SSP) learners are promoted based on specific criteria (Mathew, 2012). For JSP learners are promoted to the next grade if they meet the requirement of continuous assessment (CA) and in Junior School Certificate (JSCE) it is when a learner attains minimal marks in Mathematics and English Language. It suggests that a learner will be promoted to the next grade, while a learner without minimum achievement, including English and Mathematics, is directed to register for technical college (Mathew, 2012). In Nigeria, learners are not only promoted on merits but also on the system which considers other factors like minimise dropout the social promotion like the USA (Ewa, 2023). Okurut (2018) attests that progression is automatically implemented in Uganda to avoid students learning dropping outs. Similarly, Botswana from the Southern African Development Community (SADC) implements automatic promotion of students whose grades are lower than the expected pass mark. The automatic pass promotion policy is aimed to minimise congestion in class and dropouts and to meet the educational twelve years of

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schooling: 7 for primary and 5 for secondary ([Sello, 2021](#)). In South Africa, learners are promoted from one grade to another when they meet the minimum promotion requirement of 40% and 30% in grades 07 to 09 and grades 10 to 12, respectively. Unfortunately, many learners do not meet the minimum requirements, and they end up repeating grades many times, and others drop out of school. In order to increase learners retention in schools, Department of Education introduce the progression policy, which is known as Qualify to Progress – QP and it includes a learner should (a) not have failed the same grade twice, (b) have attended school consistently, (c) have fulfilled all school-based assessments for the grade, (d) have passed a minimum of four out of seven subjects the schools offered. The progression was established for slow learners in the South African context ([Korikana, 2020](#)), which is in line with the Department of Basic Education ([DBE, 2017](#)).

## 2. METHODOLOGY

A qualitative approach ([Creswell & Creswell, 2018](#)) was espoused for the study because the researchers sought to explore participants' perceptions regarding progressed learners in secondary schools.

### 2.1. Research Design

In this study, one of the purposes of the researcher is to gain insight into the participants' most likely experiences in daily lives, which is why he tracked phenomenological design. Neubauer, Witkop and Varpio (2019) stated that phenomenology focuses on lived experiences. This study deployed a phenomenological design to understand participants' experiences (Creswell, 2018; Neubauer et al., 2019) using Husserlian (description) (Sujatha, 2022), and Heideggerian phenomenology (interpretive) philosophy (Reiners, 2012; Wadsworth, 1994). Thus, a phenomenological design was used to identify common experiences about the impact of progressed learners on learners' performance. Furthermore, Creswell and Poth (2018) contend that the environment we live in could be understood through lived experiences. Hence, in this study a lived experiences in the context of school progressions were explored.

### 2.2. Instruments

An interview guide ([Kallio et al., 2017](#)) was used to collect data from the School Management Team (SMT), the principal, and the School Governing Body (SGB) and a schoolteacher (ST). Hence, the questionnaire had four sections A, B, C and D relating to their lines of duties. However, most questions were similar except when the perceptions were dealing with the designated duties of the participant. In addition, there were probing questions including those relating to the designated duties of participant. For example, the principals was asked to explain what interventions the district officials put in place to improve the performance of progressed learners. SMT and SGBs were asked to explain what their roles were to improve performance of progressed learners. Finally, the teachers were asked to explain which models could be put in place to curb poor performance of progressed learners. The questions were checked for accuracy by two university experts for validity ([Nudelman et al., 2024](#)). Their recommendations were considered improving the readability of the questions.

### 2.3. Participants

The researchers used purposive sampling using Criterion and stratified sampling ([Nyimbili & Nyimbili, 2024; Patton, 1990](#)) to select individuals with information and experiences of progression from different strata of the school system. Twelve participants were selected, one of each of the following categories from three schools: the School Management Team (SMT), the principal, the School Governing Body (SGB) and a schoolteacher (ST). These participants' names were labelled 1, 2 and 3 at the end of their names, representing schools they came from as follows: SGB1, SGB2 and SGB3, representing school governing body members from schools 1, 2 and 3. Others are, school

management team, SMT1, SMT2 and SMT3; School principals, SP1, SP2; and schoolteacher as ST1, ST2 and ST2.

#### **2.4. Data collection**

Data were collected using individual semi-structured interviews (ISI), Focus Group (FG) interviews, and document analysis (DA). The interview schedule was used to get participants' experiences (Maphoke, 2017). The interviews lasted 20 to 30 minutes. The researcher used an audiotape to record the interviews and took notes. The FG discussion group consisted of four participants from each school. Hence, three FGs were used. For FG the interviews lasted for 60 minutes because there were prolonged talks and discussions to get insights on progressed learners' impact on schools' performance. During interviews, participants were free to ask for clarity (Letshwene, 2019). The researcher was flexible in repeating questions and providing participants with detailed explanations where possible. After three sessions per group, there was no new information, which suggests that a saturation point was reached (Braun & Clarke, 2021). University Ethical clearance was obtained, and all ethic protocols were observed, including informed consent, confidentiality, and avoiding harm to participants (Bussu et al., 2021).

#### **2.5. Data analysis**

For data analysis, all the data collected from individual and FG interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed using inductive thematically (Moustakas, 1994). The researcher read transcripts, line by line, several times to get codes (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Codes of similar concepts were grouped into a large group to form themes (Maphoke, 2017).

#### **2.6. Trustworthiness of the study**

There are components of trustworthiness: conformability, credibility, transferability, and dependability. Credibility designates how researchers interact with participants (Cresswell, et al., 2020). In this study, the first author established a warm rapport with the study participants, and credibility was ensured by using multiple data collection methods (triangulation), such as semi-structured interviews, and focus group discussions, Cresswell (2018). Transferability refers to the application of results to a new context (Sefotho & Onyishi, 2020). In this study, different strata of participants and schools were applied to new contexts and stakeholder groups, according to Sefotho and Onyishi (2020). For transferability, the authors decided to publish the findings to get a wide readership.

### **3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS**

The study explored the impact of progression on Grade 12 learner's performance in Limpopo, South Africa. The results show that progression has negatively affected overall learner achievement in the three schools shown in Table 2). It suggests that the implementation of progression reduced other learners' performance in the schools (Mogale & Modipane, 2021). The results show that four themes emerged from individual semi-structured interviews (ISI) and Focus Group (FG) interviews: negative impact, the role of SMT, Teachers' competencies to deal with progressed learners, and learners lacked intrinsic motivation.

All three secondary schools that took part in the study were public schools represented by different stakeholders as shown (Table 1).

**Table 1. Schools and participants demography**

School	Participants Feature	Principal	SMT	Teacher	SGB
A	Gender	Male	Male	Female	Female
	Age	49	53	40	46
	Qualifications	B. ED.	B. ED.	B. ED.	B. Com.
	Teacher Experience in years	Honours	Honours	Honours	PGCE
	Subject Taught	SEPHL	ENGFAL	PHSC & MLIT	N/A
	Gender	Male	Female	Male	Male
B	Age	49	50	42	40
	Qualifications	H. ED	STD	B. A & H. ED	N/A
	Teaching Experience	24	19	15	N/A
	Subject Taught	ECON	MLIT	ENGFAL	N/A
C	Gender	Female	Male	Female	Female
	Age	51	52	58	35
	Qualifications	STD	H. ED	STD	H. ED
	Teaching Experience	23	16	28	N/A
	Subject Taught	MATH	SEPHL and LO	SEPHL and GEOG	N/A

*Note: MATH – Mathematics, N/A – Not Applicable, LO - Life Orientation, SEPHL - Sepedi Key: Home Language, STD - Secondary Teacher Diploma, ECON - Economics, H. ED - Higher Diploma in Education, MLIT – Mathematics Literacy, B.A - Bachelor of Arts, GEOG - Geography, ENGFAL – English First Additional Language, PHSC – Physical Sciences, B. Com – Bachelor of Commerce, B.A – Bachelor of Arts, SMT – School Management Team, SGB – School Governing Body.*

Table 1. Above reflects a balance of gender (6 Females and 6 Male). The age group of the participants' age ranged between 40 and 55 years, and all of them had teacher qualification requirements, including the chairperson of the SGB, who was also a qualified teacher. The chairperson of SGB was a teacher from another school that was not part of the selected schools. All the teachers were not trained to handle progressed learners but were involved in a project for improving the performance of progressed learners.

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**Table 2. Learners' pass rates for the three schools for seven successive years**

School	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
1	85	71	78.9	66.9	82.3	69.2	66.3
2	73	38.4	33.2	39.7	54.3	56.8	68.2
3	54	48.9	42.5	58.3	64.3	71.4	70.8
<b>Average</b>	<b>70.7</b>	<b>52.7</b>	<b>51.6</b>	<b>54.9</b>	<b>67.3</b>	<b>65.8</b>	<b>68.4</b>

Table 2 shows an average decrease in performance from 70.7 in 2016, when progression was affected in the three schools to 52.7 the following year. After that, performance staggered in the 50s and 60s and by 2022, it has yet to reach the level it was in 2016. The results show that the three schools with progressed learners decreased in performance in the last eight years (Table 2). The next section presents and discusses the themes that emerged from the study.

### Theme 1: Negative impact

The participants indicated that the implementation of progressed learners in schools had doomed most young people's futures. Listed below are some directed quotations from the participants:

*“The researcher (R): What are the impacts of progression on performance in secondary schools in the circuit?”*

**SP1:** “Many learners, who studied grade 12 under the progression arrangement are the ones who loiter on the streets without doing anything. Some of such learners join gangs and engage in drug abuse. They are young people making robberies at the malls of the township and in towns.

**SP2:** “Learner progression has a very negative impact on learner performance in schools. This is brought about by amongst others the following factors: content gap, increases pressure and frustrations.

Similarly, schoolteachers expressed their concerns that QP exacerbated poor performance in school as follows.

**ST1:** “Progressed learners are negatively impacting other learners in class because you may find us concentrating on them whereas other learners start to feel bored. The concentration on QP learners makes the gifted learners to lose concentration.”

**ST3:** “The progressed learners will need necessary support (which is not always given. Most learners who have been automatically promoted do not receive the extra support because teachers in poor, rural areas do not have time to give special needs to progressed learners. Hence, little effort has been given to the improvement of progressed learners”.

The study participants reported that the progression of learners had a negative effect on learning outcomes. There was a general feeling that the progression process was not beneficial because the progressed learners became complacent and did not see the need for hard work, which plummeted the overall school pass rates at grade 12. The negative learning outcomes were corroborated by the findings from the document analysis, showing that for the last 8 years, the three schools had a regression in pass rates (Table 2).

The schoolteachers (ST1, and ST3) show that QP implementation was challenging because other learners ended up doing nothing, as the teacher concentrated on progressed learners. This observation agrees with [Sama et al. \(2021\)](#), who show that teachers ignore teaching some content in favour of teaching what is expected to be asked in the final examinations. In addition, little is known regarding teaching and learning in the lower grades (Grades 8 to Grade 11), and the learners progressed to the next grade with content gaps. As ST 2 shows that teachers concentrate on topics to be examined in the stake examinations, this creates a knowledge gap among learners. This observation agrees with [Desalegn et al. \(2023\)](#) that more than 70% of the teachers concentrate on examinations and neglect slow learners; in this study, the progressed learners received little attention

## **Theme 2: The role of SMT**

During FG sessions one of the school principals (SP) from the three selected schools reported that efforts were made to improve teaching by encouraged team teaching. The SMT responded to the researchers’ questions below:

**Researcher (R):** “How does SMT support educators to assist progressed learners in class?”

**SP2:** “Mr R is right, the SMT support educators in class especially about this topic of progressed learners’ performance. Rena (meaning we), SMT members monitor the curriculum coverage. They help in tracking learner performance and assist educators in developing various disciplinary methods. Also, SMT participate in appraising and promoting teachers through the Integrated Quality Management System (IQMS)”

**Researcher (R):** School principal of School can we hear from you.



**SP3:** *“Eeh! In agreement with School Principal of School A it is true that we support the SMT members as we are also the part of them, we do not run things in isolation. Our support is through class visits as my colleagues have already mentioned, moreover, giving of feedback to educators on areas of good practice and where improvement can be made.”*

**Researcher (R):** *“Over to you my departmental head.”*

**SMT2:** *“I just want to mention two other things that colleagues never mentioned. One, we ensure that there is LTSM available for teachers to teach well in class and we monitor educators’ work, checking the work output and encouraging them to assess learners particularly, the progressed learners.”*

**Researcher (R):** *“What if the educators have a content gap in a specific subject?”*

**SMT2:** *“Outsourcing helps, and if time allows principals organise training workshops based on the topics in which educators might encounter the problem.”*

**SMT1:** *“We sometimes encourage the educators to pursue further studies.”*

**Researcher (R):** *“Is it true that progressed learner impact learning of other children in class?”*

**SMT1:** *“Yes, most of the progressed learners take time to understand some concepts. Therefore, they determine the pace of the educator in covering the syllabus. The fast learners feel neglected and become bored as the educator repeats, what they already know.”*

The school management teams supported teachers in dealing with progressed learners. The SMT support was done through school visits and giving feedback. *The results show that although SMT did their best to improve learning, they did not use pedagogies that enhanced progressed learners. It is no wonder the schools continued to perform poorly throughout the eight years because Muedi et al. (2021) show that if the right pedagogies are not used, the performance could be better. It is possible that teachers should have used principles of inclusive education and differentiated instruction.*

### **Theme 3: Teachers’ competences to deal with progressed learners.**

The research sought to find out what skills teachers had in dealing with progressed learners in their schools.

**Researcher (R):** *“What skills do you use to enhance performance of progressed learners?”*

**SP3:** *“No, we were not trained and for sure maybe more efforts are required to capacitate teachers on how to support learners that have been progressed, with regard to methodologies and identification of the appropriate teaching and learning.”*

**SP2:** *“Yes, I concur with my colleagues training of any sort never happened about this process of progressed learners. Teachers just help because of passion, but without being capacitated.”*

The study found that teachers needed more competencies to deal with progressed learners. A classroom that includes learners who were promoted on merit and learners who benefited from Qualify to Progress (QP) must employ pedagogies that can actively engage all categories of learners. The study found that while the progression policy was instituted, adequate preparatory work was not done to equip teachers with the necessary skills to teach classes with gifted and less gifted learners. Moreover, [Tang and Hu \(2022\)](#) affirm that the success of learner progression depends on teachers’ attitudes. These attitudes determine teacher-learner engagement.

#### **Theme 4: Progressed learners' lack of intrinsic motivation.**

Analysing learners' books by checking on the tasks they did, and the teachers' comments they received would improve performance. Using 15 Progressed learners' books, five from each of the schools, the results show that six out of 15 learners did not do the work, 9 had incomplete work, and none completed the work.

The study findings show that progressed learners lacked intrinsic motivation to study. It could be seen in their reluctance to do their homework. While progression was intended to motivate learners, the results show that none of the fifteen sampled learners had taken the trouble to complete their homework, six did not bother at all, and the nine who attempted did not complete the work. It suggests that the promotion motivated learners' progressed learners, but they could not sustain that motivation because demotivation took over after that, suggesting that there is a significant relationship between motivation and demotivation. This contention agrees with (Mohd et al., 2024), who state that the two are not mutually exclusive entities. In fact, motivation leads to motivation. For example, in school, if the teachers' lessons are motivating but the homework is not, then the motivation diminishes. Hence, we see progressed learners in this study failing to do their homework. Therefore, more studies are needed to explore the progressed learners' motivation-demotivation interface. How does one fact, such as motivation, relate to demotivation in the school context? It is no wonder that Mohd et al. (2024) show that demotivated learners do not concentrate on completing the homework. The learners' reluctance to do homework also depicts the crucial role of parents/guardians in motivating learners. The parents/guardians did not play their role in motivating learners to do homework, which is a significant factor in the learners' lack of motivation.

Abaidoo (2018) indicated that home support is one of the key predictors of learners' performance. While the progression policy intended to address the dropout problem and motivate slow learners, it resulted in poor performance in respective schools. The impact of this policy on learners' performance is a cause for concern. Progressed learners in a class deprived other learners of the teacher's attention because the teacher attempted to help them and hence spent much time on progressed learners who did not catch up on the content taught. This observation agrees with Febriyani and Haerudin (2020), who contend that slow learners take a lot of the teachers' time due to the many challenges slow learners face in most of the subjects (Korikana, 2020). Also, Mogale and Modipane (2021) agree with earlier studies and add that slow learners (progressed in our case) have a negative impact on overall school performance. It is because they find subjects difficult to understand so that they can participate in classroom learning. Low intellect makes slow learner students feel inferior and feel that they will never learn. Therefore, slow learner students sometimes lack self-motivation. The implications are that teachers need to be re-skilled to manage progressed learners in secondary schools.

#### **4. CONCLUSIONS**

The study found that progressed learners negatively impacted the performance of the learners and the pass rates of the schools in the study. The QP learners have challenges meeting the school requirements. Although curriculum sections of the district monitor and support teachers, there are mechanisms on how teachers should teach progressed learners. The districts deploy curriculum advisors in schools to support learning and teaching, which deal with all learners as a group. The SMTs of schools exercise their duties by monitoring and supporting the teachers, creating subjects and departmental policies with teachers, and visiting to appraise educators during the IQMS process. They continually give feedback to their subordinates about the reflection. It was established that progressed learners need more motivation to study, take time to understand concepts, and often come to class without books. Consequently, teachers have challenges coping with the work. These learners reduce the rate at which the teachers cover the content in the class. They have serious challenges with



studying and instead play, which explains why they come to school without books. However, this study also highlights the potential for improvement in the progression policy and its implementation in secondary schools, offering hope for a better future.

#### *Ethics Committee Decision*

*Due to the scope and method of the study, ethics committee permission was not required.*

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