

## **Learner Progression Policy Implementation Challenges and Possible Strategies for Improvement**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The Department of Basic Education attempts to minimise repetition, which often leads to learner dropout through learner progression policy. However, the rate of repetition and dropout is still high. In this qualitative study, implementation challenges were explored by means of semi-structured face-to-face interviews. Data were analysed using interpretive phenomenological analysis. Three themes emerged from the data: understanding policy; implementation challenges; and emergent implementation guidelines. The research findings revealed important implications for school management teams, Grade 12 teachers and school-based support teams, as well as for the Department of Basic Education in general. The research adds to the body of knowledge on learner repetition, learner dropout, and learner progression.*

**Keywords:** learner dropout, learner progression, policy implementation, targeted support, interpretive phenomenological analysis

### **Introduction and Background**

In 2013, the South African Department of Basic Education (DBE) introduced the learner progression policy in the Further Education and Training (FET) phase (Grades 10–12) (Khobe & Mukuna, 2023) as an intervention into cycles of grade repetition and learner dropout that have led to inefficiencies and inequities in education. This policy seeks to curb high repetition rates by ensuring that learners are given the opportunity to progress through the FET phase with sufficient support.

This article examines the learner progression policy and interrogates its practices. It sheds light on how repetition and dropout undermine the policy's objectives and explores possible counterstrategies to strengthen learner retention and improve educational outcomes. The purpose of this research was to investigate implementation challenges of the learner progression policy in the FET phase (Grades 10–12) and to devise counterstrategies for school management teams (SMTs), teachers and school-based support teams (SBSTs). If the progression policy is not implemented correctly, learner dropout increases, rather than decreases, which defeats the purpose of government's broader policy framework for developing human resources.

The policy of progression applies to all grades and phases. In 1998, it was first introduced in Grades R to 9 through the admission policy, which stated that a learner may only repeat once in a phase (Department of Education, 1998) and later in Grades 10 to 12. This research focused on the FET phase, as it gives a clear picture of the outcomes of this policy, particularly in Grade 12, as the exit grade.

This policy allows learners who have failed more than once in the FET phase to move to the next grade in the hope of finally exiting the system with a qualification that will create opportunities to advance their career. Although progression takes the social and emotional wellbeing of learners into consideration, its main objective is to limit the number of years learners spend in each schooling phase to a maximum of four years, thereby reducing learner dropout because of grade repetition. A learner who fails a grade is not automatically progressed but should meet certain progression requirements. The DBE stipulates criteria that must be followed when progressing learners: the consultative process; the appeal process; and curriculum support for the progressed learner (DBE, 2015). The first three instructions are administrative and aimed at ensuring that learners do not spend more than the stipulated duration in the phase, while the fourth instruction is pedagogical and supplementary to the first three in that it aims to align the final outcome of the policy with its intent. The continuing learner dropout, manifested by poor performance in the matriculation examinations, suggests that implementation of the learner progression policy is purely administrative and that the pedagogical aspects of the policy are somehow ignored.

Despite the existence of the learner progression policy, BusinessTech (2020) reported that, in South Africa, grade repetition accounted for the highest dropout rate in Grades 10 and 11 in 2020. Bhuta (2023) highlights the lack of accountability by the North West Department of Education for 27,243 learners who dropped out in Grade 10 in 2020. According to Bhuta (2023), the North West matric pass rate for 2022 increased by 1.6% from that of 2021; however, “this pass rate does not account for the [27,243] learners who dropped out of the school system in Grade 10 in 2020.” If these learners are taken into account, the actual matric pass rate for North West drops from 79.8% to 49.2%, which means that more than 50% of the learners who began Grade 10 in 2020 did not complete matric. Emekako and Ward (2017) mention “over-repetition” as one of the causes of learner dropout in North West. However, Mmutle (2019) found that learner dropout is prevalent in Grades 10 and 11 in North West because pressure on school principals to improve pass rates makes them force weaker learners to drop out of school in these grades in order to retain those learners who are likely to perform better in Grade 12. This holding back of weaker learners to maintain good matric pass rates is not unique to the province. Van der Berg et al. (2020) explain that this is the main reason for the high number of learners repeating in the FET phase, and the associated costs of this repetition are estimated to amount to 8% of the country’s national basic education budget.

According to the DBE, the matric class of 2022 achieved a pass rate of 80.1% nationally; yet, only 20,975 of the 48,361 progressed learners passed the examinations (DBE, 2023). The Director-General’s report excluded the 27,386 progressed learners who failed matric and exited the system to form part of those who had dropped out of school (DBE, 2023a), of the 20,975 progressed learners who passed matric, only 3,235 obtained Bachelor’s Passes, which allowed them to gain admission to university. In North West, of the 3,801 progressed learners who registered for matric, only 3,618 wrote National Senior Certificate (NSC) examinations, of which only 1,429 passed, and only 132 obtained Bachelor’s Passes (North West Department of Education, 2023). The North West Department of Education report is silent on the 183 progressed learners who did not write the NSC examination and probably dropped out during the Grade 12 year. These 183 learners are dropout casualties, as are the 2,189 learners who wrote matric and failed. As such, implementation of the learner progression policy in North West does not meet the policy objectives.

The purpose of this study was to investigate challenges that SMTs, teachers and SBSTs experience regarding implementing the learner progression policy and to devise implementation strategies. The research sought to answer the following questions:

1. What are the challenges with the implementation and outcomes of the learner progression policy in the FET band?
2. What strategies can be developed to improve the implementation of the learner progression policy by SMTs?

### **Problem Statement**

Despite the existence of a learner progression policy, learner repetition and dropout continue to increase in South Africa. This is evidenced by concerns raised by the Parliamentary Monitoring Group (2023) regarding the cohort of 1,177,089 learners that started Grade 1 in 2011, of which only 775,630 reached Grade 12 in 2022. The learner progression policy is based on the assumption that learners drop out of school because of grade repetition. The purpose of the policy is thus to reduce the number of years struggling learners spend in each phase.

The above statistics suggest a lack of communication and consultative process across the system. A study that was conducted in Limpopo revealed that the implementation of the learner progression policy was undermined by poor communication and lack of stakeholder consultation, which often left teachers, parents, and learners unclear about the purpose of this policy and resulted in resistance to its application (Mahlaba, 2021). Similarly, another study that was conducted in the Eastern Cape revealed that weak leadership and fragmented coordination contributed to inconsistent implementation of the progression policy, consequently exacerbating learner failure, repetition, and eventual dropout (Ndozi & Mavundla, 2024). Kekana (2024) argues that broader evaluations of the learner progression policy reiterate these findings. This researcher noted that inadequate consultation and training of teachers and parents resulted in misinterpretation, poor policy ownership, and insufficient support for progressed learners. George (2019) found that progressed learners are under the radar, especially in the lower grades, as they are not identified early in order to receive targeted support, which results in them merely accumulating content through the grades.

The above challenges reflect what Hogwood and Gunn (1984) identify as failure to meet the “[10] preconditions for perfect implementation”. Firstly, the learner progression policy is not based on a valid theory of cause-and-effect (Precondition 4) in that it assumes that progressing learners will reduce dropout; yet, evidence shows that progression without sufficient academic and psychosocial support often leads to accumulation of learning deficits that eventually result in weak matric outcomes (DBE, 2023; UNESCO, 2020). Secondly, the assumption of adequate resources (Precondition 5) is not met, as schools lack scholar transport for extra classes, remedial programmes, and overtime remuneration for teachers (DBE, 2023).

Hogwood and Gunn’s (1984) precondition of clear communication and coordination (Precondition 3) is also compromised by what Mahlaba (2021) identified as inadequate coordination between policy-makers, district officials, schools, and parents, consequently leaving widespread misinterpretation of the learner progression policy and uncertainty about the expectations of implementers. Moreover, implementers often lack the capacity to fulfil their roles effectively (Precondition 7) in that teachers struggle with large classes and insufficient training to do differentiated teaching for progressed learners (Wills & Qvist, 2023). These challenges are aggravated by unrealistic expectations (Precondition 9), as schools are under pressure to improve performance without being provided systemic support.

Precondition 1 is equally problematic, as the learner progression policy has not been supported by sustained political and administrative commitment because underperforming schools continue to operate with limited state intervention. The balance between equity and quality is not clearly explained and therefore, objectives remain ambiguous (Precondition 2). There is inconsistency in lines of authority (Precondition 6) in relation to policy implementation between national and provincial or district (DBE, 2023).

Taken together, these failures suggest that the learner progression policy’s intentions are less flawed than its implementation. By neglecting the preconditions identified by Hogwood and Gunn (1984), the policy creates new risks of repetition, dropout, and underperformance, consequently undermining the very equity and inclusion it was initially designed to promote. Progressed learners often enter Grade 12 with a content gap, leading to suppressed matric results and contributing to overall underperformance in schools (Mohlala, 2021; UNESCO,

2020). These outcomes highlight a gap between the policy's objectives and its practical effects, suggesting that the conditions for successful implementation have not been met.

### Policy implementation challenges

The problem statement outlined the misalignment between the aims and outcomes of the learner progression policy. However, it is of equal importance to consider the specific barriers that undermine implementation at school level. These barriers not only explain why repetition, dropout, and underperformance persist but also highlight the systemic failure to meet the preconditions for effective implementation, as outlined by Hogwood and Gunn (1984). Therefore, this section unpacks the key challenges that emerged from the data and links them to the relevant preconditions, thereby showing how policy breakdown occurs in practice.

The implementation of the learner progression policy has revealed several challenges that undermine its effectiveness. These challenges are not isolated but can be systematically understood through the lens of Hogwood and Gunn's (1984) framework of 10 preconditions for perfect implementation. This framework provides a useful diagnostic tool to identify why well-intended policies often fail at implementation level.

One of the most critical challenges of the learner progression policy is the lack of a valid theory of cause-and-effect (Precondition 4) – this policy is based on the assumption that allowing learners to progress to the next grade will reduce dropout rates. However, evidence (DBE, 2023; UNESCO, 2020) suggests that progression without adequate support only delays dropout, as learners often carry a content gap owing to learning barriers with them into the new grades, ultimately resulting in poor matric outcomes.

Furthermore, the challenge of insufficient resources (Precondition 5) undermines implementation, as schools report shortages of scholar transport for remedial programmes and lack of remuneration for overtime teaching. Such constraints limit the schools' capacities to intensify support to make progression meaningful (DBE, 2023).

Weak coordination and communication, evidenced by misinterpretation and inconsistent implementation across schools, reflect that the policy was introduced with limited consultation, leaving principals, teachers, and parents unclear about the objectives and requirements

(Mahlaba, 2021). In relation to Precondition 3, Precondition 7's assumption that implementers have sufficient capacity and commitment is not met, as this is hindered by the challenges of teachers – large classes, insufficient training, and lack of continuous support – to meet the need for differentiated teaching for progressed learners.

Despite minimal systemic support, teachers are expected to improve performance in matric, and this exposes the weaknesses in policy implementation (Precondition 9). The inconsistencies (Precondition 6) in the lines of authority between national directives and provincial implementation result in tension (DBE, 2023; Sayed & Motala, 2012). In addition, reliance on multiple implementers and agencies (Precondition 8) complicates coordination, as underperforming schools in rural contexts often lack strong parental and community involvement to reinforce progression strategies.

Finally, the assumption that external circumstances will remain stable (Precondition 10) is contradicted by persistent socio-economic inequalities manifested in poverty and limited parental support that exacerbate the challenges of progressed learners, which ultimately lead to dropout (Ndozi & Mavundla, 2024; UNESCO, 2020).

These challenges reveal that the learner progression policy, though well-intended, fails: the system has not met the essential preconditions for effective implementation. Hogwood and Gunn's framework thus provides a valuable lens for understanding why implementation gaps persist and why the policy has not achieved its intended outcomes.

Mustari and Tujuh (2017) define policy implementation as an activity that involves provision of regulations, implementation guidelines and resources so that the activities carried out by the implementer can be impactful in achieving policy goals. According to Mambeh and Fonkeng (2019), policy implementation means adhering to policy prescriptions to achieve policy objectives. Viennet and Pont (2017) see policy implementation as a change process aimed at putting into operation a specific policy that affects the education system because it is purposeful, multidirectional and contextual. In this research, policy implementation referred to all the processes and activities between the passing of the learner progression policy bill and its daily enactment in schools to reduce learner repetition and dropout. In the case of this study, successful learner progression policy implementation meant accomplishing policy objectives,

which would be seen in fewer learners repeating or dropping out of school in Grades 10, 11 and 12.

Top-down policy theorists, such as Pressman and Wildavsky (1973), and Sabatier and Mazmanian (1979), believe that policy implementation is the carrying out of policy-makers' decisions by administration and educators. Their solution to implementation challenges is to intensify implementation monitoring. Top-down theory was useful in this research, as it helped to shed light on implementation monitoring of the learner progression policy. Bottom-up policy theorists, such as Elmore (1979) and Lipsky (2010), have criticised this approach from a political perspective, as they view policy-making as a political game where implementers influence inputs and outcomes.

The theoretical framework for policy implementation proposed by Hogwood and Gunn was used to explain the challenges with implementation of the learner progression policy. This framework was useful for this research in that it helped to record the lived experiences of SMTs, teachers and SBST committee members to understand their challenges with implementing the learner progression policy.

### **Hogwood and Gunn's theoretical framework for policy implementation**

A theoretical framework is a set of concepts, assumptions, and models drawn from scholarly work that guides the analysis of a research problem. According to Grant and Osanloo (2014), a theoretical framework provides an analytical lens that encompasses different ideas to examine a phenomenon. A theoretical framework, such as Hogwood and Gunn's (1984) framework, does not point to causal factors to explain policy failure; rather, it is a diagnostic checklist of conditions that must be met for successful implementation. Although the learner progression policy is a South African intervention, its implementation challenges are universal issues of policy execution. Therefore, Hogwood and Gunn do not have a theory but a theoretical framework against which policy implementation and challenges to implementation can be reflected to determine possible improvements in the implementation process.

Hogwood and Gunn's (1984) theoretical framework provides a classic framework for evaluating these challenges. It identifies 10 preconditions for perfect implementation that must

be met for any policy to be successfully implemented. Applying this framework provides an analysis of South Africa's learner progression policy as regards where implementation breaks down, for example, lack of communication, lack of coordination, and inadequate resources. An external theoretical framework like this one allowed me to benchmark South Africa's experiences against global understandings of policy implementation. This article, therefore, contributes to broader debates on why education policies often fail during implementation. South Africa's repetition and dropout patterns show that, while the progression policy is well-intended, its outcomes are undermined by weak policy implementation.

Hogwood and Gunn's theoretical framework clarifies implementation challenges, revealing the mismatch between policy intent and outcome by systematically testing whether necessary preconditions prevail. This framework was used to highlight possible challenges in the South African education system regarding the successful implementation of the learner progression policy. While the objectives of the learner progression policy (that is, reducing repetition and dropout) are clear, evidence shows the following:

1. External circumstances do not impose crippling constraints

In South Africa, poverty, overcrowded classrooms, and limited resources in lower-quintile schools cripple constraints that prevent the learner progression policy from functioning as intended (Ndozi & Mavundla, 2024).

2. Adequate time and resources are available

Schools often lack the time, capacity, and teaching resources to provide extra support for progressed learners, and this undermines the policy goals (Kekana, 2024).

3. The required combination of resources is available

Besides teaching time, schools need financial resources, extra class resources and psychosocial support resources. Mahlaba (2021) argues that many underresourced schools do not have a combination of these, resulting in continued dropout among progressed learners.

4. The policy is based on a valid theory of cause-and-effect

While the learner progression policy assumes that progression will reduce repetition and dropout, research reveals that without remedial support, learners merely accumulate shortfalls and eventually drop out (Wills & Qvist, 2023). This reveals a weakness in the underlying theory of change.

5. Cause-and-effect relationships are direct, and there are few links in the chain

According to Mahlaba (2021), the learner progression policy depends on multiple implementers, namely teachers, SMTs, parents, and district officials. The longer the channel of communication, the more distortions occur, especially when teachers are not adequately consulted.

6. There is a single implementing agency, or agencies can be made to act in perfect coordination

The DBE relies on provincial departments, district offices, and schools to implement the learner progression policy, but weak coordination across these three levels has been found in rural settings (Ndozi & Mavundla, 2024).

7. There is complete understanding of, and agreement on, objectives

Teachers often misunderstand and/or resist the learner progression policy, believing that it relaxes academic standards, while parents are uninformed about its intent. Kekana (2024) posits that a lack of shared understanding undermines ownership of the policy.

8. Tasks are fully specified in correct sequence

Research conducted by Mahlaba (2021) indicates that some schools do not have clear guidelines on how to provide support to progressed learners once they have been progressed to the next grade, and the absence of detailed implementation steps results in inconsistent practices.

9. There is perfect communication and coordination

One of the most critical shortfalls of the learner progression policy is the breakdown in communication across the education system (Kekana, 2024; Mahlaba, 2021). Teachers and school leaders often report being excluded from consultation, which leads to lack of implementation fidelity (Kekana, 2024; Mahlaba, 2021).

10. Authority can demand and obtain perfect compliance

Although the DBE mandates learner progression, evidence reveals resistance from schools, or inconsistencies in policy application, especially in cases where it is believed that learners are not ready for the next grade (Ndozi & Mavundla, 2024).

The application of Hogwood and Gunn's (1984) preconditions to the South African learner progression policy shows that high repetition and dropout rates in Grades 10 to 12 persist because several of these preconditions are not met. This theoretical lens reveals limited consultation and weak communication across the education system that hinders common understanding of the policy's intent, while resource shortages and inadequate learner support undermine its effectiveness. This results in a widening implementation gap, where the policy's aim of reducing repetition is not fully realised and learners continue to drop out of school. This framework highlights that refining this policy is not only sufficient to address the repetition and dropout crises but also to strengthen the systemic conditions necessary for policy implementation.

### **Research design**

I sought to understand policy implementation challenges by exploring the experiences of SMTs, teachers and SBSTs. A qualitative case study design, guided by the interpretivist research paradigm, was employed to explore the views of SMTs, teachers and SBST committee members as implementers of policy at the school level.

### ***Qualitative design***

In order to obtain an in-depth understanding of the experiences of SMTs, teachers and SBSTs regarding the implementation challenges of the learner progression policy, a qualitative study was conducted. Quantitative research would not have allowed for a deep understanding of the experiences of the research participants, as it measures only quantity in relation to a phenomenon.

### ***Interpretive method***

The interpretivist paradigm was used to explore how policy implementers at the school level made sense of the learner progression policy. I acknowledged the subjectivity and situatedness

of this paradigm and interacted with participants to make meaning of their lived experiences (Smith et al., 2009).

### ***Population***

The study population comprised schools in North West. Four schools in the local district were selected by means of convenience sampling. The sample was homogeneous, as all four schools catered for more than 50 matriculants who had underperformed. These schools also comprised progressed learners, which lowered the schools' matric pass rates in the years under investigation.

Homogeneous sampling was used because of the need to focus on schools with similar characteristics in order to generate rich, context-specific insights. This is supported by Patton (2015), who argues that homogeneous sampling is relevant when the goal is to study a subgroup that shares common features, allowing for a more detailed exploration of issues affecting the group. The DBE (2023) reported that schools with large Grade 12 cohorts are more likely to reflect systemic challenges in learner progression, repetition, and dropout compared to small schools that often have different dynamics. Secondly, underperforming schools with progressed learners in Grade 12 provide a critical lens through which to examine whether the learner progression policy contributes to learner outcomes in contexts already under strain.

### ***Sampling strategy***

Purposeful sampling of cases that represent the phenomenon under investigation increases the depth and relevance of the research findings (Cohen et al., 2018). In this study, schools and participants who could provide the best possible answers to achieve the purpose of the research were purposively selected. Four secondary schools in the Ngaka Modiri Molema District, North West, were sampled. These schools progressed matric learners and underperformed when those learners' results were included in their matric results. The four sampled secondary schools comprised 50 or more Grade 12 learners who had obtained less than 60% in their matric examinations, which is regarded as underperformance. All the schools progressed learners in 2019 and 2020, and when those learners' results were included in the schools' matric results, their matric pass rates dropped below 60%.

The participant group consisted of the following members: two SMT members, namely the principal and department head whose responsibility it was to progress learners; a Grade 12 teacher who had progressed learners in the subject; and an SBST committee member or coordinator responsible for screening, identification, assessment and support (SIAS) at the school, as they deal directly with learners who experience learning barriers.

### ***Data collection***

I used open-ended questions because qualitative data were used to interpret meanings (Phothongsunan, 2010). Semi-structured interviews were conducted to allow for probing. My two cellphones were used to audio-record the interviews, which were later transcribed verbatim. As recommended by Noon (2018), the interviews were conducted in a closed office, and only the participant and I were present to ensure confidentiality, to calm the participant, and to prevent data contamination.

In the case of each of the selected schools, the principal, one Grade 12 teacher, one SBST member and one departmental head were interviewed for one hour to capture multiple perspectives on the implementation of the learner progression policy. The principals were interviewed to provide insights into the school's leadership in policy interpretation and management of progressed learners. The Grade12 teachers offered a classroom-level perspective of the challenges faced by progressed learners and the practical application of the progression policy. The SBST members described the support provided to progressed learners and highlighted systemic gaps in learner support. The role of departmental heads was to provide insights into repetition and dropout.

### ***Data Analysis***

The data were analysed using the interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA), following the procedures outlined by Smith et al. (2009). The process involved the following iterative stages: reading and re-reading transcripts; initial noting; developing and connecting emergent themes; identifying patterns across cases; and constructing a final table of themes.

I first read each transcript in depth to ensure immersion in each participant's account. Bracketing was used to suspend preliminary impressions, allowing for each case to be analysed

independently before comparisons were drawn. In line with Noon (2018), descriptive comments were noted in the margins to capture the participants' perspectives on the learner progression policy, its purpose, promotion requirements, and implementation challenges. These notes were then condensed into short phrases, facilitating the development of theoretical connections while preserving the integrity of meaning.

Subsequently, emergent themes were identified and organised according to conceptual similarities, following the order in which they appeared in the transcripts (Noon, 2018). As analysis progressed, themes were clustered; some formed superordinate categories while others were discarded because of weak or insufficient evidence. This interpretive process, as Wiley (2020) noted, inevitably involved translating participants' words into my analytical vocabulary. To ensure transparency, themes, codes and page references were tabulated, which allowed for the analytic trajectory to be traced back to the original data. Each case was treated on its own terms, and bracketing was again employed to prevent prior findings from influencing subsequent analyses (Lannan, 2015).

Finally, I returned to the thematic tables of each participant to refine and consolidate the results. The superordinate themes and their related sub-themes, which formed the basis of the research findings, were collated into one table.

### ***Trustworthiness***

Lincoln and Guba's (1985) four criteria of trustworthiness were employed to ensure rigour of this qualitative inquiry.

#### **1. Credibility**

In order to ensure credibility, I employed purposive homogeneous sampling of four underperforming secondary schools in North West, each with progressed learners whose results suppressed the school's matric results. All participants were qualified and had implemented the learner progression policy prior to the study. Bracketing was applied to minimise researcher bias – prior assumptions and personal experiences were consciously set aside during data collection and analysis so that participants' voices could be heard and the findings could be properly guided.

2. Transferability

A thick description of the research context, participant characteristics, and the school performance profiles was provided. Such detail allows readers and future researchers to determine the extent to which the findings can be applied in similar contexts (i.e. underperforming schools in South Africa or comparable education systems).

3. Dependability

An audit trail was used to ensure dependability in all stages of the research process, including data collection, coding, and data analysis. This was done to ensure that the research process could be repeated or critically reviewed by other researchers.

4. Confirmability

Researcher bias was minimised by using participants' direct quotations to ground data interpretation. Additionally, triangulation of sources – such as comparing school performance records with teacher narratives – helped to ensure that findings were not entirely the product of my perspective.

By applying these four criteria, the validity and reliability of the study were strengthened, thereby ensuring trustworthiness of the findings on the implementation of the learner progression policy and credibility in terms of the contribution to scholarship.

***Ethical considerations***

Ethical clearance was obtained from the North-West University Faculty of Education Research Ethics Committee. After obtaining permission to conduct the research, I applied to the North West Department of Education to collect data from the identified schools in the Ngaka Modiri Molema District. Thereafter, I contacted the principals of the four identified schools and sent the informed consent forms by email. The informed consent document explained the aim of the study; the participants' rights, including their right to confidentiality and anonymity; the low risks associated with participation in the study, as well as the benefits of participation; the audio-recording and transcription procedures; and the process that would be followed to

communicate the research outcomes. At the start of each interview, I requested participants' permission to audio-record the interview, using two devices, and I confirmed their consent.

### **Data Presentation and Discussion**

The data revealed key challenges with regard to the implementation of the learner progression policy. Three overarching themes emerged from the data and are discussed next.

#### ***Theme 1: Inadequate support, resources constraints, and weak cause-effect linkages***

Grade 12 teachers and SBST members highlighted insufficient academic, remedial and psychosocial support for progressed learners. Additionally, overcrowded classrooms and limited material resources, like textbooks, exacerbated repetition and dropout challenges. Departmental heads reported that they could not differentiate assessment because of large class sizes and the high number of progressed learners. In addition, the teachers complained about struggling to balance Annual Teaching Plan (ATP) coverage with additional learner support. All participants highlighted that the lack of scholar transport for extra classes after normal school hours often prevented learners from attending remedial classes. Some teachers also complained about the lack of remuneration for overtime, which reduced their motivation to present extra lessons after school or over weekends for progressed learners (Precondition 2). This theme speaks to Hogwood and Gunn's (1984) precondition related to adequate resources and capacity for implementation. Ndozi et al. (2024) and Willis et al. (2023) argue that insufficient remedial programmes, learner support, or logistical and financial support for teachers create a situation where progressed learners enter Grade 12 underprepared, and this perpetuates the cycle of underperformance.

The lack of scholar transport for afternoon and weekend classes as well as teacher remuneration shows how contextual and systemic resources gaps directly affect policy implementation. Studies in South Africa, as reported by the DBE (2023) and Mahlaba (2021), reveal that resource constraints and lack of incentives for teachers have a negative impact on learner engagement and performance in underperforming schools. Globally, research has shown that progression policies fail when the necessary support structure and incentives are absent (UNESCO, 2020).

More importantly, the results show a weakness in what Hogwood and Gunn (1984) call “a valid theory of cause and effect” (Precondition 3). The learner progression policy assumes that progressing learners who failed to meet the promotion requirements will reduce the dropout rate and improve matric completion. However, in practice, insufficient support structures, such as lack of scholar transport for extra classes or teacher remuneration, lead to the assumed causal link breakdown. Instead of the expected improvement in learner attainment, progression often results in delayed failure or dropout, as was evident in the sampled underperforming schools. This is echoed by Mahlaba (2021), who revealed that learner progression without systemic support merely transfers learners’ struggles to higher grades. Kekana (2024) supports the argument that policy is undermined by the lack of enabling conditions in underresourced schools. Globally, UNESCO (2020) cautions that progression policies without proper support structures lead to “false progression” – thus, learners advance in name but not in competence. In the South African context, therefore, the breakdown in the cause-and-effect relationship that is embedded in the policy hinders its effectiveness and entrenches systemic inequalities.

This is what one principal said concerning scholar transport challenges:

*Extra classes; there’s no provision. So, we struggle. That is one... one reason why we are really not... some teachers and I say we teachers... some teachers are discouraged from coming on Saturday, because there is no point in coming for 10 learners. Is majority is not in, because they can’t afford transport.*

One departmental head had this to say concerning the lack of remuneration:

*I saw that now when we had... we had this... this Saturday camps now. So, teachers were not compensated. And so, this resulted in some of the teachers not wanting to come, because some are travelling. Some are really... So, they... and they are complaining about budgeting. So, if you budget for this month, and nowadays something unexpected, that the department is just forcing you to do, without giving you an option. So, it impacts. Some teachers are not willing to come.*

Another departmental head responded as follows with regard to the lack of time to provide support:

*The support is not... is not... it's not that enough. Other issues are the curriculum must be completed. And then you will find in most cases the teacher rushing to be on par with... with the ... with the ATP. And the... the support is not... is not that... that much.*

One principal said the following regarding lack of human resources:

*Provision of additional human resources. Looking at the number of schools and a number of learners that... that progressed. For a particular learner... number of learners that are progressed, there should be a provision of additional educators.*

### ***Theme 2: Policy clarity, weak communication, and stakeholder consultation***

A key challenge that emerged from the data was the lack of clarity and effective communication pertaining to the learner progression policy. According to Hogwood and Gunn (1984), there should be minimal external constraints for policy implementation to be successful (Precondition 1) and all tasks must be fully specified and sequenced (Precondition 6). The participants in this research reported inadequate consultation during policy rollout, which left implementers at the school level unsure of the mandates of the policy. This aligns with the view of Spaul (2022), who argues that weak communication and planning hinder effective educational reform in South Africa. The fragmentation and inconsistent support reported by the DBE (2023) reflect that the policy is not executed by a single agency (Precondition 4), and this emanates from the tensions between national directives and provincial implementation structures. Communication channels are also not perfect (Precondition 7) in that there is a lack of consultative platforms that leave schools feeling excluded in decision-making (Chisholm, 2021). Participants reported that the policy was poorly communicated – there was minimal consultation with teachers, parents and learners, resulting in misunderstandings, resistance, and inconsistent policy implementation.

An SBST committee member said the following on the objectives of the policy:

*The purpose is that the learner must not stay for long. OK? To take the learner out of the system was the purpose, then some other time when we refer them to Taletso [Taletso TVET College], 'cause that they can work with their hands. OK? And the purpose of removing them... the purpose of them to be progressed is not to discourage anyone to be more in that phase. OK? This must be out of the system.*

The fact that the SBST member did not understand the objectives of the learner progression policy showed that policy implementation was hindered when communication and consultation were weak (Kekana, 2024; Mahlaba, 2021). Hogwood and Gunn (1984) emphasise that perfect communication and stakeholder compliance are the requirements for successful policy implementation. In the South African context, the absence of structured communication channels has contributed to a policy implementation gap, with progressed learners underperforming and depressing overall matric results. This theme illustrates that effective stakeholder involvement and engagement are critical to bridging the gap between policy intent and outcome.

### ***Theme 3: Leadership and coordination challenges***

Participants claimed that inconsistent leadership and weak coordination significantly affected policy implementation success. Principals complained that departmental guidance on implementing the progression policy was limited.

This is what one SBST committee member said:

*Challenges is not all stakeholders are supportive, for example, the parent side. OK? Some of learners they don't get support. Some of them they are not staying with parents. You will find that I left the child at home with my children. OK? Times... trips taking care of the siblings. OK? So is the challenge. And, again, the challenge is you have progressed. You're not fit to be there, get frustrated. OK? But some they manage. It depends with the support also, OK, if all the parents and us educators we are supportive to the progressed learners.*

The findings of this research reveal that, while the learner progression policy was designed to reduce repetition and dropout, its implementation in underperforming schools remained a challenge because of systemic barriers. Weak communication and consultation, insufficient support and resources, and inconsistent leadership and coordination undermined the outcomes of the policy. Moreover, the lack of a valid cause-and-effect relationship between progression and learner success highlights a fundamental flaw in the policy's design and implementation. Instead of improving matric completion, progression often translated into delayed failure, underperformance of schools, and continued dropout. These challenges underscore the urgent need for targeted interventions that address both structural and pedagogic gaps if the progression policy is to achieve its objectives in the South African schooling system.

### **Strategies for implementation**

In the context of educational policy, strategies refer to broad, action-oriented approaches that outline how implementation challenges can be addressed. They are not tied to specific actions in a single school or district but rather provide a framework for guiding policy enactment across multiple levels of the system (Hogwood & Gunn, 1984). In this study, strategies were aligned with the 10 preconditions for effective policy implementation and were framed to respond to the challenges that emerged from the data.

First, enhanced communication and stakeholder engagement are essential. The progression policy should be disseminated with clarity, and SBSTs can participate in shaping implementation. This reduces the fragmentation that arises from tensions between national directives and provincial execution (Chisholm, 2021; DBE, 2023).

Second, resource allocation must be strengthened. Schools require dependable scholar transport for after-hours classes and remuneration for teachers who provide support beyond normal teaching hours. UNESCO (2020) highlights that equitable implementation cannot occur without adequate resources, echoing Precondition 2 of Hogwood and Gunn's framework.

Third, capacity building for teachers and leaders should be prioritised. Professional development must emphasise differentiated instruction, formative assessment, and psychosocial support to help teachers manage mixed-ability classrooms effectively. This

strengthens implementation fidelity by reducing conflicting demands and empowering teachers (Spaull, 2022).

Fourth, monitoring and accountability structures should shift from punitive compliance to supportive intervention. District officials should collaborate with schools to identify barriers and provide tailored assistance rather than enforcing rigid compliance (DBE, 2023).

Finally, contextual flexibility is crucial. As socio-economic contexts differ across provinces and districts, schools should be allowed to adapt implementation strategies while still aligning with national policy objectives. This addresses Precondition 9 on the limits of control and Precondition 10 on conflicting demands (Hogwood & Gunn, 1984; UNESCO, 2020).

Together, these strategies emphasise that the learner progression policy can only succeed if it is supported by clear communication, adequate resources, skilled practitioners, supportive monitoring, and contextual adaptability.

While strategies provide a broad framework for guiding policy implementation, they must be translated into specific, actionable recommendations that can be applied by policymakers, school leaders, and practitioners. Recommendations differ from strategies in that they are tailored to the study context and focus on what should be done in practical terms to strengthen the progression policy. Based on the findings of this study, and guided by the strategies outlined above, the following recommendations are made.

### **Recommendations**

At the policy level, the DBE needs urgent reforms to ensure that the learner progression policy achieves its intended goal of promoting equity and access without compromising the quality of education. The DBE needs to strengthen the clarity of guidelines on learner progression to avoid misinterpretation at the school level. Furthermore, the state must invest in adequate resourcing – especially scholar transport and targeted funding for extra classes interventions – as inequitable access to resources continues to widen inequalities between schools (UNESCO, 2020).

There is a need for policy framework revision to include clear mechanisms for monitoring and evaluation of the impact of progression on learner outcomes. Without systematic accountability measures, the risk of repetition and dropout remains high. The DBE should also prioritise teacher workload considerations by providing remuneration for educators who extend support beyond normal teaching hours. Such measures would align the learner progression policy implementation with Hogwood and Gunn's (1984) preconditions, particularly those related to adequate resources and continued support for implementers (principals, teachers, departmental heads, SBST committees, district and provincial officials).

At the practice level, schools must take reasonable and deliberate steps to strengthen the support offered to progressed learners within existing resource constraints. Principals as leaders at the school level must make it their priority to structure communication with teachers, parents, and learners regarding progression in order to reduce confusion and foster shared accountability. When schools create open channels of communication, the implementation of national policies becomes more effective (Mahlaba, 2021). Furthermore, SBSTs should be capacitated to coordinate remedial and psychosocial interventions for progressed learners, ensuring that these learners do not lag farther behind. This resonates with UNESCO's (2020) emphasis on the centrality of inclusive and school-level support mechanisms in making meaning out of progression.

Teachers should integrate differentiated teaching within the classroom to address the diverse needs of progressed learners. Wills and Qvist (2023) assert that modest strategies like flexible grouping, peer teaching, and formative assessment can compensate for resource shortages. Where possible, schools should do what is commonly referred to as "twinning", or collaborative planning, to share strategies and reduce the burden of having to provide support to large numbers of progressed learners. Departmental heads have a critical role of mentoring teachers and monitoring the consistent application of curriculum differentiation.

Finally, schools should inculcate a culture of data-driven monitoring and tracking the performance of progressed learners throughout the year rather than only at the end of the year. Ndozi and Mavundla (2024) suggest continuous monitoring and timeous intervention so that learner retention can be increased and the possibility of learner dropout can be reduced. Schools

should use learner performance data to inform remedial strategies so that a proactive approach can be taken to challenges before they escalate into repetition or dropout.

### **Conclusion**

This research revealed that implementation of the learner progression policy in North West is not acceptable or comprehensive because of a lack of provision of the required combination of resources by the DBE and a lack of understanding of the policy by SMTs, teachers, and SBSTs. This is manifested by partial implementation of the learner progression criteria and lack of support for progressed learners at the school level. The above-mentioned challenges made participants call for a review of the policy, while others called for a repeal of the policy.

In conclusion, the success of the learner progression policy in South Africa relies on a dual commitment: robust policy reform, and context-sensitive school-level practice. The role of the DBE is to ensure that policies are clearly explained, sufficiently resourced, and consistently monitored. Additionally, schools must adopt inclusive, innovative and data-driven strategies to support progressed learners effectively. Without this interaction, progression risks exacerbating cycles of repetition, underperformance, and dropout rather than breaking them. Bridging the gap between policy intent and classroom practice, therefore, calls for collaboration, transparent communication, and systemic commitment to equity and quality education.

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