Pedagogical Implications on Curriculum Support for Learner Progression

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ABSTRACT

Part of enabling progressed learners' successes is provision of adequate curriculum support to bridge content gap. Learner progression was introduced as an intervention for retention and to minimise school dropout. Dynamics around education policy implementation gaps seems to be obstacle between progression policy promises and outcomes. This is visible through the national grade 12 results which continue to decline amid learner progression. Within debates of progression policy derailing quality education, Covid19 disruptions unleashed inequalities in the education sector. For instance, learning losses and in turn pedagogical implications for progressed learners' extended learning opportunities. This paper reports on curriculum support provided to progressed learners reflecting on Covid19 disruptions using Bandura' Social Learning Theoretical lens. The study adopted a qualitative research approach placed within interpretivism paradigm and employed exploratory case study design. Six teachers were purposively selected from three secondary school in one district of the Limpopo Province, South Africa. Thus, two grade twelve teachers per school whose subjects were directly affected by progression policy because the study focuses on progression from grade eleven to twelve. Data were collected through document analysis and interviews. Thematic analysis was used for data analysis. Findings revealed limitations to reach out to progressed learners' due catch-up plans because of lockdown and rotational models. This study concluded on a fair compliance on policy stipulations yet limited specific intervention strategies. The unique contribution of this study is the reflection on three implementation gaps which had implications for progression policy outcomes.

KEYWORDS

Curriculum support; implementation; pedagogical implications; progression policy.

INTRODUCTION

There has been a growing interest on learner progression with an intention to reduce continuous retention (Davis et.al., 2022; Kika & Kotze, 2019; Mahoko & Omodan, 2023; Munje & Maarman, 2016; Yan et.al., 2022). This is the practice to move learners to the next class without meeting minimum promotion requirements. Progression of learners' advocates curriculum support to bridge content gap (Kolobe & Mihai, 2021; Ukurut, 2018). However, the gap between education policy and classroom practices prevents progress in education. For instance, in the United States of America there was a call to end "social promotion" and introduction of No Child Left Behind Act to support all "slow learners", but the basics of instruction were challenging to implement (Leckrone & Griffith, 2006; Shaw, 2010). In Uganda, implementation of "automatic promotion" was ineffective in reducing the probability of students' dropout (Ukurut, 2018). Progressed learners are placed in low ability classroom and classified as low streams against learners in high ability classes (Mapolisa, 2014). This highlight dynamics around policy conceptualisations and what people do when they are exposed to new policy (Spillane et.al., 2002). Learner progression policy sense making is critical towards relevant curriculum support.

South Africa is no exception to debate policy promises and outcomes with learner progression. The policy on progression stipulates amongst others that identified learners require curriculum support to bridge content gap (Department of Basic Education, 2015). However, the policy is cited amongst the contributing factors of the decline of grade 12 results (Kika & Kotze, 2019). In addition, grade 12 results reflect a high pass rate with the exclusion of progressed learners (Department of Basic Education, 2019). This implies that such learners are not able to adjust to workload of current and might eventually dropout which could be a defeat on the intention of the policy (Grossen et al., 2017). On the other hand, Kader (2012), argue that teachers 'limited understanding of the progression and promotion policy could be one of the reasons for inconsistencies and flaws in implementation process. Seemingly, the misalignment between schools' progression-promotion requirements and the national policy compromises smooth implementation process (Lekalakala, 2013). This misalignment has implication on classroom practices.

Progression policy success is dependent on attainment of grade 12 National Senior Certificate. Statistics South Africa (2013), reports that progression policy contributes to the achievement to ensure that all children complete basic education. However, Munje and Maarman (2016) argue the theoretical and practical concerns such as learners' wellbeing; abilities, opportunities as well as logistical support during teaching-learning process, availability of support systems in place to facilitate coping strategies for leaners and resultant performance require attention. Part of support recommended for learners identified for progression was Multiple Examination Opportunities (MEO) were progressed learners chose to write less than six subject packages during final exam depending on performance in their preparatory examination (Department of Basic Education, 2016). However, MEO was discontinued in 2019

due to compromises in the sector' efforts in addressing issues of quality and efficiency in schools (Department of Basic Education, 2019). This further question the challenges on policy intentions and results.

Studies quoted above contribute to knowledge on curriculum support for progressed learners. However, little is known on the progression policy plans and outcomes during Covid19. The outbreak of Covid19 intensified challenges to reach out to progressed learners (Adu et al., 2022; Dube et al., 2022; Makura, 2022). For instance, school closure because of lockdown and curriculum recovery plan which aimed to preclude learning losses (Amin & Mahabeer, 2021). These challenges had some implications on learning process especially for progressed learners who had to cover bridge content gap. Therefore, this study sought to investigate gap that exists between progression policy promises and outcomes taking to cognisance inequalities that aroused from the pandemic. To achieve the purpose of this study, three research questions guide this paper:

- What were the teachers' plans for curriculum support for learner progression during the outbreak of Covid19?
- How was curriculum support for progressed learners monitored amid the pandemic?
- How was learner progression policy implemented with regard to curriculum support?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Curriculum support plan for learner progression policy and the pandemic

Learner progression policy emanate as intervention for retention which often led to school dropout. The intention was to strike a balance to the depreciating curve on learners starting grade 1 through to grade 12 (Spaull, 2013). This intervention is aligned with South African' learners constitutional rights democratic mandate of creating opportunities for access and equal opportunities for all learners. Different barriers to learning dispossess learners' opportunities to perform to their full potential (Spaull, 2013). Performance below expectation per grade led to the retention policy which argued for repetition towards meeting promotion requirements, but research shows that this exercise has no evidence of academic improvement (Beere 2017). In state, learners lose their self-esteem and become demotivated eventually dropout. Hence, progression policy came in to ensure learners move with their age cohort.

The policy on progression is a global phenomenon and referred to either, social promotion or automatic promotion. The common feature on the policy worldwide is to maintain quality education through additional support as learners move to their respective grades (Ahmed & Mihiretie, 2015; Connor, 2018; Department of Basic Education, 2015; Hernandez-Tutop, 2012). The issues of learner support appear to be a detrimental yet critical factor towards the success of this policy. Progressed learners require additional academic support to bridge content gap. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 in United State of America is an example of the need for support, especially because this act held stakeholders accountable towards learners' achievement (DeLeon et al., 2022; Murnane & Papay, 2010; Salinas-Vasquez et al.

2020). From a social justice perspective, support is evident in the Cross River state of Nigeria where social promotion is recommended to replace merit-oriented examinations to produce a process to facilitate achievements for all (Ewa, 2023). Subsequently, Ahmed and Mihiretie (2015), argues that automatic promotion without support in place may lead to low class attendance and insufficient learning and then school dropout. Therefore, curriculum support is critical to assist progressed learners bridge content gap.

Literature on progression policy implementation points deficit additional support as the key factor towards success particularly in South African context. Amongst others feature teachers not happy about the policy due to belief that it compromises quality education (Brahmbhatt, 2020). On the other hand, Munje and Maarman (2016)' argument from a Capability Analysis lens captures "*incomplexities and unfreedoms*" of the progression policy on learners. Muedi et al. (2021) found lack of specific support strategies is obstacle for progressed learners to bridge content of the missed and current class. Amid uncertainties on curriculum support for learner progression, the outbreak of covid 19 which led to an abrupt closure of schools. This required additional intervention on how learning proceeds for learner already at risk.

An immediate response to the pandemic was to proceed with educational activities remotely. This quick shift triggered inequity in the education system as the level of support for all learners depends on the ability to conduct lesson online. While this could have been an opportunity to enhance digitalisation in education, Dube and Ndaba (2021) asserts inequality and disparity between schools was visible during the pandemic. This division affected schools in rural areas were progressed learners are dominant. The integration of technology to support progressed learners showed potential for positive results in Gauteng Province (Kolobe & Mihai, 2021). Availability of technological tools deprived schools in rural areas to continue with learning process during the pandemic. For instance, network connectivity, power cuts and even skills to use the devices was paramount (Lancker & Parolin, 2020). This raise concerns in terms of progressed learner curriculum support especially in rural settings where this study is conducted.

Monitoring Curriculum support

Literature on curriculum support for the automatic promotion/progression in different countries indicate lack of adequate support in the learning process (Allensworth, 2006; Davis, Ntow & Beccles, 2022; Ndarutse, 2008). Uganda reported two policy implication on automatically promoted students' cognitive learning achievement; the need to conduct awareness campaigns and the need to assess adequacy of other factors that influence the quality of education (Ukurut, 2018). Mbudhi (2022), reports that support programmes designed to catch up with the missing competencies do not yield positive results due to time constraints and lack of knowledge on how they can assist automatically promoted learners in Namibia. Effective implementation of automatic promotion in Cameroon depends on strict supervision to ensure teachers and head departments comply with pedagogic and administrative

prescriptions of the policy (Tani, 2018). The implication is that insufficient intervention strategies has led to greater defeat in the progress of identified learners.

The notion of curriculum support on learner progression in South Africa emanates from school policy such as admission policy, National Policy Pertaining to the programme and promotion requirements and of late guideline for the progression and promotion requirements. Progression Policy forms part of the key education transformation vehicles taking to cognisance disadvantaged learners who end up losing track of their peer due to retention. The policy provides stipulations to limit possible repetition in the new grade, but insufficient curriculum support seem to be a major obstacle for the success thereof (Beere, 2017; Kader, 2012; Nkosi, 2019). Additional learning opportunities assist learners understand content better (Bojuwoye et al., 2014). Hence, success of learner progression depends on curriculum support beyond normal school timetable.

Progression policy stipulates the need to offer additional learning opportunities and monitoring of the support mechanisms towards effective implementation (Department of Basic Education, 2015) However, literature reveals flaws in tracing progress (Mogale & Modipane, 2021). Brambhatt (2020), maintains the importance of monitoring to gauge level of competency. Therefore, this study provides insight on curriculum support activities were monitored during the pandemic to establish the policy promises vis-à-vis outcomes.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study used Social Learning theory (SLT) as lens to reflect on curriculum support provided for learner progression during the covid19 disruptions. The SLT was introduced in 1977 as a cognitive behavioral theory from a Bobo doll experiment performed from 1961 to 1963 by the psychologist Albert Bandura (1977). The theory focuses on social context and posits that learning occurs by observing others' actions (Chuang, 2021). The theory blends cognitive, environmental, and behavioral factors to cater for varied ways learning styles. SLT assist in the observation of how cognitive and environmental factors contribute to learning and behavior (Kay & Kibble, 2016). Within context of this paper, this theory' flexibility, applicability, and adaptability in varied behaviors for both formal and informal learning environments ranging from classroom to knowledge networks within the broader public.

This theory is useful in exploring pedagogical implications for learner progression policy promises and outcomes looking at learning disruptions emanated from the outbreak of covid19. SLT permits teachers to focus on reinforcement to shape behavior, model appropriate behavior and build self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977). Thus, empathy and care are crucial to achieve positive results pending an immediate shift to alternative ways of learning from traditional classroom pedagogies. The theory provided a blueprint to reflect on how teachers provided curriculum support to progressed learners.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted qualitative research approach placed within an interpretivism paradigm because nature of the research problem requires interaction with participants (Creswell, 2013; Kumar, 2011; Rehman & Alharthi, 2016). An exploratory case study design was employed to explore teachers' insights on curriculum support provided to progressed learners to bridge content gap (Yin, 2014). Purposive sampling was used to select six teachers grade 12 teachers from three schools in one district of Limpopo Province, South Africa. The focus of this study was on learner progression from grade 11 to grade 12. Therefore, four females and two males whose subjects were either adjusted or condoned towards progression of a learner. This led to a sample of two teachers per school. Document analysis and semi-structured interviews were used to probe participants views on possibilities for curriculum support given inequalities demonstrated by the outbreak of Covid 19 pandemic. In addition, the participants range between four and ten-years teaching grade 12. They were information rich participants because they were able to reflect on the experience pre and post the pandemic (Yin, 2014). This paper reports part of the findings for a doctorate thesis so, ethical clearance was granted from the university where the doctoral study was conducted, and permission to collect data was granted from Limpopo Department of education. Documents consulted involved, the guideline for implementation of the promotion and progression requirements for grade 10-12, School learner progression database, School plan for curriculum support. Semi-structured individual interviews were conducted after document analysis where participants were able to provide insights on the phenomenon. Thereafter, Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic approach was used to analyse data. Participants were coded numerically as teacher-T 1- 6 form School A, B and C respectively (Govil, 2013) to ensure that participants to protect their identity.

FINDINGS

The findings revealed a fair compliance on progression policy implementation which could have been disrupted by the outbreak of Covid19 pandemic. Furthermore, pandemic disruptions also played a huge role in aggravating inequalities that exists in the education sector. This paper picked three gaps in the implementation process: Insufficient plan for implementation, Policy tracking and reflection. These three gap stems from research questions echoing the study.

Insufficient plan for implementation

The study found lack of preparation to offer curriculum support for progressed learners which differed in context. According to the Guideline for the Implementation of the Promotion and Progression Requirements for grade 10-12 (2015), School Based Support Teams (SBST) are responsible for a holistic support. *That is from compiling database, monitoring and reporting progress, developing and implementing remedial programmes, identification of core content, ensuring regular test and retest on challenging content areas, informing parents and proposing action for improvement, offering regular meetings with parents and offering workshops for parents of identified learners to support teaching and learning.* This implies that SBST must

ensure that progressed learners receive adequate support particularly on areas missed in the previous class while catching up with the work in the current class. Therefore, it was critical that all roles are executed as stipulated. However, lack or inactive SBST came out as a major setback towards effective implementation. This led to isolated intervention plans depending on varied conceptualisations which informs classroom practices. While databases from the three schools showed reasons for progression, some teachers plan for intervention were embedded in expanded opportunities for all learners left behind. Progression policy stipulates *intervention strategies beyond normal school timetable,* when probed on curriculum support T1 had this to say:

"I personally figured out how to go about the policy because I am pursuing a postgrad degree around this area. I think for me the policy itself is not clear on how well the learners may be supported academically…the challenge is that it's difficult to only focus on identified learners from the rest of the school because majority of our learners require academic support, learning losses from the lockdown really affected us a lot".

The assertion above highlight some of the challenges in schools that prohibits focus on specific learners. Within context of this study, this compromises the stipulation that vouch for necessary support to assist identified learners to progress to the next grade while promoting their dignity, self-esteem and encouraging socialisation with peer (Department of Basic Education, 2012). Plan for practice is a critical yet complicated aspect towards effective implementation of the policy. Like the preceding verbatim regarding holistic intervention strategies, T3 mentioned:

"I think in many instances teachers see how they go about reaching out to learners, in our school we don't really have a specific intervention programme for progressed learners, but they are part of remedial activities organised beyond normal school timetable".

Different reasons for progression call for individualised curriculum support tailored to respond to species needs. Plan for practice at this point would be to ensure that end-users understand their expectations and how to go about executing roles as stipulated in the policy. Munje and Maarman (2016), reported a similar finding that implementation of progression policy is flawed by the lack of clear structure and implementation plan which have implication for learner performance. Drawing from Social Learning Theory, this finding relates with cognitive factors whereby curriculum support needs to be linked with cognitive demand of identified learners.

Progression Policy Tracking

An ideal situation on this aspect is to track progress of implementation. This has the potential to identify challenges at an early stage and address areas for improvement. The policy on progression stipulates monitoring progress and reporting to relevant stakeholders. As far as tracking is concerned schools under study documents revealed quarterly tracking done through staff and parents meeting. This assisted in monitoring progress and identifying areas for

improvement. Within the context of this study this was a positive indication towards success. T6 highlighted that:

"We report on learner progression quarterly during staff meetings on learner performance. These records form part of schools' quarterly reports that is also shared with parents. We know in terms of performance how far they are and their areas of need because we discuss during staff meetings".

While teachers understudy indicated an effective policy tracking, parental involvement was an area for concern on reporting and collaboration on intervention programmes. T2 had this to this:

"Our challenge in many instances is parents not attending meetings. We are struggling with school parents meeting so it's not always easy when we call parents of identified learners".

In terms of assertion above, Parental involvement is an important factor towards successful implementation. However, the parents lose track of the children' progress due to lack of attendance. This according to data implies their non-compliance on their roles as members of support team. (Đurišić & Bunijevac, 2017:144), argues that "although parental involvement is recognised as being of significance in the education of children, there remains great diversity concerning parental involvement". Schools do not have control on lack of parental involvement even if policy successes depend on their contributions. This finding ties with behavioural and environmental factors particularly because parents became main source of information during the pandemic.

Reflection

Post tracking, reflecting on intervention programmes appears to be a critical stage towards an effective implementation. Thus, follow up on progressed learners' remedial activities, regular meetings as well as workshops. Data reveals execution of these roles as school improvement plan and not necessarily for learner progression. While some of the elements of Inclusive Education (IE) were picked in the data, intervention may not be fully placed within IE due to dynamics around implementation. On remedial activities, schools highlighted overall challenge on reading and writing. Therefore, intervention activities in this regard targeted all learners and not progressed learners. Document analysis from schools' understudy painted a similar approach to reading and writing challenge *collaboration with reading club from the community, to assist learners with reading*.

Interview data revealed similar findings in terms of implementation support and review. T4 mentioned:

"In our school we have teachers assigned to learners who have different challenges; reading, writing and we work closely with the reading club in the community. We keep records on progress as per the feedback from teachers, we write to parents to assist them, some respond some don't for various reasons but then as the school we try our best to support learners at risk".

The verbatim above highlight attempts for support, this is a positive indication towards positive outcome of the policy. However, at the time of data collection there was no indication of progress in terms of performance. In response to this T5 highlighted that:

"Our learners need intervention and its no longer the issue of progression or not, the break during lockdown took us back and its really a serious challenge. During lockdown, we could not engage them at all, and then rotation...time constraints. Learners are grappling with basic content and its not easy to just focus on specific group of learners. We include them in the remedial programmes".

Data revealed teachers' own decision on how to implement the policy based on the own understanding and subject need. Hence some of the teachers mentioned whole class challenge which makes it difficult to focus on progressed learners. Adonis (2021) reported similar finding on lack of official "catch up" programmes and clear directives on curriculum support programmes teachers thought and reacted differently towards policy imperatives. The holistic reflection emphasis is on the cognitive, behavioural and environmental factors towards for the betterment of curriculum support needs of progressed learner beyond the pandemic.

DISCUSSION

Progression policy intends to minimise continuous retention which often leads to school dropout (Department of Basic Education, 2015). Furthermore, the policy consists of various stipulations to ensure identified learners do not miss content of the missed and current classes. While the policy is clear with stipulations, the findings reveal lack of clear directives in terms of intervention needs for progressed learners. This led to varying isolated intervention programmes depending on understanding of the policy. Policy interpretation determines its goal achievement (Mbudhi, 2022). Policy description was significant in this case for a similar understanding to avoid misconceptions. This would trigger response feedback that emanate from a common understanding as far as the policy is consent (Bandura, 1977). Sense making in this case becomes apparent because they inform practices. *"Understanding can follow action"* (Spillane, et.al 2002:421). A threat on the emotional and psychological being of progressed learners during the lockdown and rotational attendance models which affected content coverage was picked from participants. Ngema and Maphalala (2021), also found that teachers indicated implementation of the progression policy created problems in terms of content covered in relation to the amount of content assessed.

This study revealed holistic intervention programmes for all learners due to learning losses from the outbreak of Covid 19. This based on situational factors differ from school to school and in many instances subject needs within one school. Adonis (2021) reported a similar finding in terms of conflicting and contrary approaches for implementation by individual teachers. Therefore, it is critical to acknowledge different context in which progression policy is implemented especially because teachers own interpretation of this policy depends on the

environment that they find themselves (Bandura, 1977). School context plays an important role on the curriculum support for progressed learners.

While progression policy stipulates parent role on curriculum support, this study found parental involvement as another obstacle towards effective implementation. This implies that parents do not execute duties as part of the intervention to bridge content gap. Through parental involvement schools enrich school programmes by bridging parents into the educational process (Đurišić & Bunijevac, 2017). Therefore, it becomes imperative that parents track their children progress to assist with execution of intervention programmes especially with learning losses encountered from the pandemic. This will enable identified learners model the quality that their parents possess (Bandura, 1977). An overwhelming intervention for all instead of progressed learners due to covering learning losses. Whole school challenge on reading and writing which makes it difficult to focus on specific group of leaners. Capacity building and development is critical to ensure every child access education (Suleima & Iddrisu, 2017). This has the potential to address progressed learners' individual needs given learning conditions during the pandemic which created backlog in terms curriculum.

CONCLUSION

Despite curriculum reform efforts over decades of education transformation, education policy implementation remains a critical debate. Teachers continue to be at the centre of discussion regarding understanding, interpretation, attitudes, development, situational factors and how they eventually put plans into practice. The argument on unclear implementation of progression policy regarding "curriculum support" remain in question (Munje & Maarman, 2016). While the study concludes on a fair compliance of the progression policy implementation, progressed learners' educational needs increased especially post pandemic circumstances. Progressed learners' double learning losses (missed class content and covid 19 lockdown) open yet another gap for policy implementation. The unique contribution of this study is reflecting on three implementation gaps during the implementation process which had influence on the classroom practices. Therefore, alignment between plan and practice requires a constant reflection in process to identify challenges (lockdowns) that hinders progress and possible intervention towards success.

Note:

The paper of the findings for a doctoral thesis.

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