SUPPORT TEAMS’ COLLABORATION ON CURRICULUM SUPPORT FOR PROGRESSED LEARNERS IN LIMPOPO, SOUTH AFRICA: TEACHERS’ PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract: Curriculum support for progressed learners is one of the stipulations encouraged towards effective implementation of progression policy which intends to minimise unnecessary school dropout rates within the South African education. However, dynamics around implementation seem to be a challenge that prohibit success of educational policies. Part of curriculum support process is that districts and schools have intervention strategies to assist progressed learners to bridge content of the previous and current class. This article explored teachers’ views on how the district and schools’ work together to offer curriculum support to learners identified for progression. The study followed qualitative approach placed within interpretivism paradigm where an exploratory case study design was utilised. Study population consisted of secondary school teachers based in the Further Education and Training phase. Purposively sampling was used to select three teachers from five schools of Lulekani circuit in Mopani East district of the Limpopo Province, South Africa. Document analysis and semi-structured individual interviews were used to collect data. Bandura’ Social Learning Theory was utilised to provide theoretical insights on the district and school based support teams’ collaboration towards curriculum support upon the implementation of progression policy. Data was analysed through thematic approach. Findings of the study revealed unsatisfactory collaboration and curriculum support offered within Inclusive Education. The study concluded misconceptions of progression policy contributed to confusion with Inclusive Education policy and hindered sufficient curriculum support. The study recommends on intensive training of support teams at the district and school level as well as monitoring thereof.

Keywords: Curriculum support, collaboration, progressed learners, support teams, teachers

I. Introduction

Support within the context of education means addressing barriers that could hinder learning (Brahmbhatt, 2020; Bojuwoye, Moletsane, Stofile, Moolla & Sylvester, 2014). South African Education sector addressed learning barriers through promulgation of policies. These policies seem to be perfect on paper until they are brought at the ground for implementation purposes (Mabasa, 2013). Like many other policies, the policy on progression which intended to minimise school dropout that emanate from grade retention, seem to be adding to educational challenges instead of addressing. Amidst issues such as overcrowded classes and workload that come with the implementation of policies (Abosi, 2007), particularly the implementation of progression policy, (George, 2019; Kika & Kotze, 2019; Mogale & Modipane, 2021) the question as to how

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progressed learners bridge content gap keeps on popping (Brahmbhatt, 2020; Kolobe & Mihai, 2021).

Progressed learners imply learners who failed for the second time and cannot be retained but allowed to progress to the next grade so that such a learner does not spend more than four years in a phase (DBE, 2015). While progression of learners is aligned with South African Schools Act (1996) and the National Policy Pertaining to the Programme and Promotion Requirements (2011), the policy on progression points that there is no progression in Grade 12. This entails that progressed learners must still meet the minimum promotion requirements despite that they are progressed. South African education sector further intervened with Multiple Examination Opportunities commonly known as modularisation which allow progressed learners write a minimum of three subjects over two examination terms to increases their chances of passing (DBE, 2017). However, the Council of Education Minister discontinued modularisation due to challenges associated with implementation (DBE, 2019). Discontinuation entails extensive support for progressed learners so they exit basic education successfully.

The notion of curriculum support is a global trend towards the adoption and implementation of quality teaching and learning. In the United State of America (USA), disabled students where taught in the same setting as those who are able through the introduction of Education for all Handicap Children Act (Choate, 2000). In addition, USA drew the Bill of No Child Left Behind Act 2001 which provided academic support to ensure learner achievement improve (Simpsnon, LaCava & Graner, 2004). Resource teachers in Canada have a responsibility to offer support to classroom teachers to accommodate learners with specialised education (Porter, 2000). Curriculum support is useful to learners who are viewed as at risk and escalates learners’ chances to achieve (Fluke, O’Connor, Hoff & Peterson, 2014). Supporting progressed learners can increase their learning proficiency.

There seem to be uncertainties around curriculum support which then compromises the flow of learning. For instance, teachers who are not adequately prepared to offer support, as well as curriculum rapid changes without preparation to execute changes (Leepo, 2015; Blankstein, 2012). In any case teachers have to ensure that no child is left behind in the process of teaching and learning. Provision of relevant support entails understanding learning needs of individual learners. Heslip (2020), highlights that learners learn differently and some learners require extra learning time while others need different teaching approaches. Taking cognisance of such dynamics has potential to the development and implementation of relevant curriculum support programmes.

Amongst the stipulations of the implementation of the progression policy, curriculum support appear to be an important feature to ensure that identified learners bridge the content gap. However, the recent announcements of Grade 12 results posit a challenge on curriculum support because of the huge decline indicated with inclusion of progressed learners. While this is the case, stipulations of this policy indicate the roles and responsibilities of district and school based support teams to ensure that progressed learners receive adequate support (Department of Basic Education, 2016). These support teams are at the forefront to ensure development and implementation of additional learning opportunities outside regular school hours (Department of Basic Education, 2016). It is worth noting that the two structures (district and school based support teams) are stationed at different destinations whereby schools source support from district. Therefore, it is important to understand how these structures collaborate and administer their roles for curriculum support.
Literature reveals collaboration as an important aspect in the education system. A United States study conducted on technology-mediated intervention on adolescents reading comprehension reports that schools and community based organisations collaboration has the potential for improving students reading ability (Parker, Nelson, Zaslofsky, Kanive, Foegen, Kaiser & Heisted, 2019). Meanwhile, Mphahlele (2005), asserts that collaboration allows stakeholders to engage in addressing diverse needs of learners. So, it is important that support teams at the district as well as schools work together for the benefit of progressed learners. Stakeholders’ collaboration has potential for the success in the implementation of policies in education sector (Mahlo, 2011; Thuketana, 2018). Benefits for collaboration involve higher grades, positive attitudes and improved behaviour, programmes that are more successful as well as successful schools (Mahlo, 2011).

1.1. Problem Statement

In principle, the responsibilities of districts and schools based support teams are categorised for the facilitation of their social adjustment or access to alternative career pathways that could be available locally (DBE, 2015). Thus, a collaborative approach to ensure that progressed learners bridge content gap. However, lack of adequate curriculum support is likely to distract identified learners’ academic progress. Issues such as; time constraints, communication breakdown, insufficient resources and infrastructure, lack of skills and knowledge, various conceptualisation of the policy itself emerge as challenges that prohibit effective curriculum support for progressed learners (Mogale and Modipane, 2021; Brahmbhatt, 2020; Kolobe & Mihai, 2021; George, 2019). Yet, grade 12 teachers account for the poor performance including progressed learners’ academic performance.

Literature indicates that high performing schools in countries like Australia, Finland, United States and Japan emphasise on collaboration in their investment on teacher training, induction and development (Abbott, Middlewood & Robinson, 2014; Li & Zhang, 2015; Moore, 2016). Conversely, in South Africa, schools receive support in academic issues through curriculum advisors who offer workshop and/or trainings in their subjects of specialisation. Curriculum advisor work together directly with teachers to ensure efficient teaching and learning (Mavuso, 2013). However, literature shows that teachers do not receive adequate and sufficient support (Mahlo, 2011; Smith, 2011; Mashau, Steyn, Van der Walt & Wolhuter, 2008). This usually lead to isolated working conditions which tend to threaten professionalism (Fourie, 2017). This highlights the importance of collaboration for support to ensure that effective teaching and learning takes place. Therefore, this article reports part of the findings for a doctoral study which sought to explore district and schools based support teams’ pedagogical implications for progressed learners. The bigger study focused mainly on curriculum advisors and teachers as members of the support teams due to their direct involvement in academic progress. However, the focus of this article is on teachers’ viewpoints with regard to the district and school support teams’ collaboration towards offering curriculum support to progressed learners. This article is guided by the following research questions in response to the above statement of the problem:

- What are teachers’ perspectives on support teams’ collaboration towards progressed learners’ curriculum support?
- What are participants’ ideal collaborative approach for curriculum support of the progressed learners?
II. Theoretical framework

Bandura (1962)’s Social Learning Theory (SLT) was used in this article. SLT blends cognitive, environmental and behavioural factors to accommodate various ways of learning and regards modelling as an important source of learning (Bandura, 1962). Cognitive factors embrace knowledge, expectations and attitudes; environmental factors such as social norms, community access and influence; behavioural factors which include skills, practice as well as self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977). Furthermore, SLT lay its foundation on cognitive processes which play significant role in changing behavioural patterns because learning occurs in multiple ways (Bandura, 1977). In the context of support teams’ collaboration for curriculum support, the district (in this case curriculum advisors)’ and schools (in this case teachers) interaction has the potential to enhance intervention strategies (Stimulus) that communicates directly to identified learners (response). This “meditational process” consist of four learning methods; attention which exposes behaviour as well as how it is imitated, retention which focuses on remembering behaviour, reproduction which is centred around the ability to perform internalised memory, lastly motivation which focuses on the willingness to perform behaviour and comes with a reward or punishment (Bandura, 1977). Support teams’ collaboration requires the four meditational processes to ensure that progressed learners receive adequate intervention in turn success of the progression policy. However, teachers’ perspective for collaboration paints a different picture and highlight obstacles due to dynamics that emerged in the implementation process.

Ideally, an effective policy implementation involves putting all the stipulation in practice logically in anticipation for positive response. However, there seem to be missing puzzles with regard to the implementation of the progression particularly on curriculum advisors (CAs) and teachers’ collaboration for curriculum support. Attention which was meant to trigger stimulus was ignored and that let compromised meditational process since foundation was not well constructed. The problem emanated from offering curriculum support for progressed learners within Inclusive Education (IE). For instance, addressing the diverse needs of all learners to ensure quality teaching and learning (DBE, 2014) rather than developing additional learning programmes for learners identified for progression (DBE, 2015). Thus, there were elements of ignorance to conceptualisation of the progression policy itself because it was place under the umbrella of IE. Within the context of this study, Bandura’s theory has the potential to guide the collaborative approach for the curriculum support that communicates directly with progressed learner with suggestions to overcome hindrances. In addition, the theory highlights areas were the chain for collaboration in the context of progression policy was missed.

III. Research methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research approach placed within interpretivist paradigm. Interpretivism suggests that knowledge and reality are constructed through interaction with human and their world view (Rehman&Alharthi, 2016; Scotland, 2012). This paradigm assisted in the choice of methodology based on the assumption that insufficient collaboration contributed to limited curriculum support and more likely to prohibit positive results to ensure that progressed learners bridge the content gap. The qualitative approach enabled an in-depth description, interaction of the problem and results in a comprehensive literature which signalled reaction (Creswell, 2013). Aligned with interpretivism and qualitative research approach, this study used an exploratory case study design to explore support teams’ collaboration for
Generated data highlighted several flaws that compromised effective curriculum support relevant for curriculum support. The findings are presented below:

**Theme 1: Identifying progressed learners**

This study revealed that schools A, C, and D relied on the South African School Administration and Management System (SA-SAMS) schedules for identification of progressed learners. On the other hand, Schools B and E had databases that indicated subject that placed learner at risk and a slot for an updated information for areas of concern. Schools compiled special schedules for progressed learners which gave the impression that they sent databases to the district via circuits. Various identification processes in schools’ understudy revealed implementation in isolation whereby schools implement as per their own interpretation of the policy. In many instances, identification was done at classroom level by subject educators. T11 from SD mentioned that:

“With the list I get from the school schedule, I look for the learners’ exam scripts and do item analysis, so this helps me to identify problems that made learners be progressed so that when I teach I focus more on what they don’t know”

Likewise, T1 from SA indicated that:

“I identify the learners by giving a baseline assessment and mark it with them….is then that I can identify that this learner has got this kind of a problem”

The above assertions make it clear that interpretation informs practice. Identification is crucial stage for the effective implementation of the progression policy. It is apparent from the above responses that teachers are conscious of their role for identification. Identification informs the type of support required based on reasons for progression. This is the stage where collaboration...
commence. Since CAs do not have direct contact with learners, it was teachers’ responsibility to ensure that district receive databases. T4 from SB elaborated that:

“districts get databases from us through schedules we do for progressed learners only ... they don’t really have access to our classrooms when they visit me you find that they also have to go to other neighbouring schools. they come for support and evaluate me based on what is in my files”

It is apparent from the quote above that collaboration amongst CAs and teachers is limited. On the other hand, the district depends on information found in teachers’ file as per the monitoring instrument.

Theme 2: Intervention

Data generated for this study revealed a limited district-school collaboration for curriculum support. Data showed CAs intact support which take place through off-site workshops and school visits. However, there is no indication of support for the implementation of progression policy. Instead progression policy is addressed in between barriers to learning which is more to do with inclusive Education. Document analysis revealed majority of the schools understudy had improvement plans which contained schools’ plan for intervention for barriers to learning. Plan for intervention varied from school to school but highlighted similar aspects for curriculum support. Aspects covered item analysis which indicated topics mostly failed as well as plan to address such challenges. Plans for intervention included Saturdays or after school extra lessons depending availability. Outsourcing teachers from neighbouring schools also featured as another way for intervention. Although documents analysis presented a positive attempt for curriculum support, intervention plans were meant to address challenges for all learners and not progressed learners.

Interviews conducted backed the disclosure that intervention programmes were meant for all learners who experience challenges rather than progressed learners. T8 from SC had this to say:

“I don’t really have a remedial programme specifically for QPs, what I do is I organise extra classes for learners who might have challenges, sometimes I’m guided by tests or informal activities we do then I look at how best I can assist them”

On the other hand, T15 from SE posited that:

“My dear, we have a lot of work, all I do is to ensure that I use the SIAS policy to sort out classroom problems. I am an inclusive pedagogue, so I ensure that I attend to diverse needs of leaners so that at the end every learner is clear during teaching and learning”

While the overall picture for intervention looked positive, there seemed to be no evidence for intervention strategies mainly for the progressed learners though interaction picked an attempt for curriculum support. T13 from SD stated that:

“As of now there is no documented plan for intervention. In the next grade, it becomes business as usual. As educators, we help, them being progressed learners or promoted learners employing expanded opportunities as they arise. No strategies documented to utilise for progressed learners”

The above assertion indicated a flaw in the plan to bridge content gap. While that was the case, majority of the participants indicated that the district does not really collaborate with schools. T9 from SC mentioned that:

“I for one don’t have a problem with offering curriculum support, but then my concern is that the district seems to be distancing themselves from this whole process. They do not train us or even follow up on the things we are doing. Now we do not even know if we are on the right track.
I think they must on quarterly basis offer trainings because now we just do things from our own opinions. That is why they will say we have attitude, they do not understand we are so confused”

T15 from SE had this to say: “If the district can be available for us frequently, guide us through the implementation, do follow ups, provide us with sufficient professional support I think we will go through. I think they also need to just call the identified learners for motivations, so that our work can also be easy” The district’s support is vital towards effective implementation, but according to some of the teacher participants, this was not happening. T7 from SC shared the same sentiments with T15: “The district is invisible and sometimes when we ask them for help they do not respond on time; I understand they don’t work in one circuit but at least when we are expected to implement it’s important that they take us through the process otherwise we will see many policies failing. I for one feel lost because they do not take us seriously. They call us for support meeting in the first term, after that they just send us tools or request that we submit files, it seems they don’t care about us yet they expect us to be effective”

Assertions above portray flaws that occur in the implementation process. Thus, limited engagements could be the reason for insufficient intervention.

Theme 3: Monitoring and support
This study found unsatisfactory monitoring and support for curriculum support relevant for progressed learners. There was no documented evidence for support. This then entails that effectiveness for intervention could not be measured. However, minutes of the meetings in school B disclosed a limited effort to offer curriculum support to progressed learners. That is, a plan for intervention discussed with parents. There was no indication of engagements with support teams at district. Although document analysis showed no attempt for support in Schools A, C, D and E, majority of participants in this study commended support they receive from CAs for subjects they teach. Teachers mentioned that they have accessed to CAs anytime of the day. However, it is not sufficient towards curriculum support for progressed learners.
T1 said that: “Not according to my expectations as such because you find that she’s somewhere supporting other teachers, and not able to come this side. But whenever there’s a need I find it up to myself to call her and arrange and if we arrange she must make sure that she comes”

It seems as if CAs are overwhelmed and do not really manage to offer curriculum support with focus on progressed learners. Off-sites and onsite support dwell much on curriculum coverage or teachers’ file without reflecting on specific challenges due to time constraints. Circulars remain the main source of communication.

“I don’t see the district supporting us in this regard, there is some sort of a broken chain because in most case they just send circulars that are also from their seniors, and we teachers must implement and write reports. We get frustrated when they come because they sometimes expect us to implement things we didn’t understand”

Quote above highlight the challenges that prohibit effective intervention strategies that could assist progressed learners bridge content gap.

V. Discussion of findings

The findings of this study indicated that collaboration is a two-way process. This process allows two or more people collaborate towards an achievement (Marhaya, Malatji, & Maphosa, 2017). Thus, teachers are also responsible to ensure that support teams at the district level receive
databases which informs the type of intervention required (Mogale & Modipane, 2021; Kolobe&Mihai ,2021). Therefore, collaboration in this regard is informed by the databases created by teachers or even schools. Collaboration opens opportunities that enable stakeholders to commence implementation on a common ground (Hudson, Hunter & Peckham, 2019). A tailored database is likely to give directives for suitable intervention for the identified learners so that district-school curriculum support enhances quality teaching and learning.

The findings revealed that confusion between IE and progression policy somehow shifted a holistic focus to stipulations of progression policy. Instead of developing and implementing intervention programmes that communicates to the needs of progressed learners, teachers opted to compile improvement plans for all learners in subjects they teach. Thus implementing within IE (Smith &Loock 2019; Kolobe&Mihai ,2021). Musitha&Mafukata, (2018), asserts that progression policy is on its own an intervention for quality teaching and learning. Therefore, its effectiveness on implementation is likely to determine effective learning process.

According to the findings, there seemed to be a lack of social cohesion amongst support teams at the district as well as schools understudy. Fourie (2017), argues that CAs may offer advises on academic interventions required. Such collaborations are likely to offer opportunities to monitor, detect challenges and improve at an early stage. While this study unveiled an element of compliance, focus was on the product rather than process. Mavuso (2013), also reports that subject advisor visits focus on their monitoring role rather than a holistic support. Nkambule and Amsterdam (2018), argue that lack of human resources contributes to lack of desired support.

VI. Progression policy vs Inclusive Education

This study discovered that intervention strategies for progressed learners was implemented within boarders of Inclusive Education. It was noticed that offering curriculum support within IE somehow compromised relevant intervention programmes and in turn affect the effective implementation of progression policy as a whole. Progression policy and dynamics around policy implementation often lead to defeat intention for promulgation. Progression policy focus mainly on learners who spent more than four years in phase, such learners will then require curriculum support to adjust and cope academically (DBE,2015). Different conceptualisations, resources and insufficient preparation for implementation in progression policy (Kolobe&Mihai ,2021; Kika&Kotze, 2019;) often lead to confusion with other policies particularly IE. IE cannot be overlooked because it emphasises on curriculum support but this article revealed that placing progression policy under umbrella of IE suppress other variables for effectiveness particularly support teams ‘collaboration.

IE is a complex phenomenon on its own and blending it with progression policy is an addition to existing complications for implementation. IE involves restructuring of education systems to accommodate the learning needs of all learners (Engelbrecht&Green ,2007). In addition, implementation of IE challenges ranges principles for practise, confusing IE with special needs education, lack of resources, attitudes that arose from viewing IE as an “add-on” rather an integral part of learning process, lack of adequate skilled teachers, and socio-economic and cultural constraints (Mwangi&Orodho, 2014; Michael &Oboegbulem, 2013; Mwoma, 2017; Teng, Jiar&Jaffri, 2014; Donohue &Bornman, 2014). While IE cannot be discarded in the curriculum support offered to the progressed learners, an ideal intervention goes beyond the implementation IE. Inclusivity may be an element of curriculum support rather than as the whole.
VII. An ideal collaborative approach

Overall, this study revealed a limited collaboration amongst the district and school based support teams with a slight attempt for curriculum support at school level. Participants, ideal support teams’ collaboration comprises an element of inclusivity, reflection and interactions at every phase of the implementation process coupled with policy implementation workshops and/or trainings. The study of Malatji, Mavuso and Malatji (2018) revealed that a good collaboration result into a success for any project. A resilient and consistent collaboration according to participants enhances commitment together with motivation for practice. Thus, support teams taking decisions collaboratively (Slater, 2004) to ensure that progressed learners engage with the content. This study picked that collaboration could escalate professional growth and could lead to anticipated outcome.

VIII. Conclusion

This study concluded that confusing progression policy with IE resulted with challenges that hindered collaboration in turn effective curriculum support that responds to the needs of progressed learners. Challenges included shift of responsibilities, insufficient support from the senior structure, implementation without conceptualisations and monitoring. It was important that CAs as members of the district based support teams work together with school based support teams in this case teachers for a common goal. While there was attempt for curriculum support, collaboration gap appeared to be a major hindrance. Curriculum support offered in isolation at classroom level without support or monitoring compromised evaluation and closed opportunities for improvements. Training and/or workshop by the provincial curriculum unit was necessary to lay a foundation for the implementation process and to ensure uniformity within the province. Since policy implementation cannot be painted with one brush due to environmental issues, cluster collaborative approach is vital and likely assist support teams to draw good practices and possibilities for outsourcing. Furthermore, district- school support teams remain liable for responsibilities assigned to ensure that progressed learners receive sufficient support. This study recommends an intensive and continuous training of support teams. Such practices allow opportunities for reflections and distinct curriculum support.

References


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