
Stakeholder Pressure in Terms of Shaping and Improving Grade 12 Results

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Abstract. The paper examines the external pressure faced by underperforming secondary schools, specifically those with Grade 12 results below 60%, as labelled by the Department of Basic Education (DBE). Such schools endure negative stigmatisation and face significant pressure from external bodies to improve results, but this pressure often overlooks contextual factors such as socio-economic disadvantages that affect performance. Pressure can be detrimental as it leads to stress and focuses on proving rather than improving, often leading to ineffective interventions. The exploration of how external pressures and accountability measures historically and presently impact school performance, comparing these findings with educational frameworks from other countries, such as the US is also explored in aid of understanding this underperforming phenomenon. By using the qualitative method, the paper's findings identify the pressures on Grade 12 teachers to produce good results without adequate support, challenges in teaching progressed learners, implementing the Annual Teaching Plan (ATP), and a lack of discussion around challenges impacting academic performance. The emphasis for the DBE to provide more support, recognizing the complexities of underperformance and addressing external and internal factors that impact schools is important to consider. Therefore, our recommendation is that the DBE advocates for holistic improvement strategies that align pressure and support from educational offices, with better alignment of policies to address the real issues faced by struggling schools.

Keywords: Underperformance, Grade 12, socio-economic, National Senior Certificate, South African education system.

Introduction

The secondary schools whose Grade 12 results were below 60% in the previous year are regarded as underperformers. The Department of Basic Education (DBE) regards the aggregate performance of Grade 12 learners below 60% as underperformance. The Grade 12 learners are those learners doing the last grade of basic education level or doing the last grade before enrolling for higher education level. This grade or level serves as a prerequisite or entry requirement to higher education institutions like universities. Owing to this, the DBE puts

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pressure to secondary schools to produce better results that will enable them to enrol in higher education institutions. Grade 12 results are crucial in this regard. The underperforming schools are polarised as bad because they fail to hit the targeted or required mark and thus become victims of media attention (Harris & Jones, 2022). Unfortunately for these underperforming schools, this labelling does not consider contextual factors that affect the performance of these schools; the only thing they care about is good results. The external world, consisting mainly of DBE officials from the circuit and regional offices, pressures the underperforming schools to ameliorate their current year NSC results. The underperforming schools are also labelled as schools in difficulty, schools facing challenging circumstances, failing schools, schools in special measures, and turnaround schools (Vangronigen et al., 2022). Whatever label is applied to these schools, they need support to improve their academic performance. In addition to the stigma and labelling these schools have, they get pressure from the external world to improve their results. On the same note, Racissi and Tavakoli (2002) suggest that a small amount of pressure can increase personnel efficiency, while too much pressure may result in negative mental and physical changes. The extent of pressure exerted on the underperforming schools can have positive or negative effects. Hence, the external world should be cautious about the pressure on these schools.

Education officials visit the underperforming schools to do work inspections (in order to provide support where need be); this puts pressure on schools, creates fear for teachers, and stress over the great work to be done amid the inspection (Ryan & Kurdi, 2014). Life in school environment becomes difficult for underperforming schools due to pressure from the outside world. Harris and Jones (2022) clarify that most schools labelled as underperforming are located in areas of significant disadvantage; whether in rural, coastal, or urban locations, their poverty levels may be similar, but other contextual factors can vary dramatically. Contextual factors can affect the performance of learners, whether negatively or positively. Judging the performance of schools without considering contextual factors may be unfair. The underperforming schools are normally pressurized into better performance through scrutiny, prescription, and layers upon layers of tedious self-evaluation, and the emphasis is on proving (Harris & Jones, 2022) the availability of certain documents like lesson planning, work programmes, etc and not improving. Skeritt (2020) argues that due to the pressure from the outside world, underperforming schools do not do the schoolwork for the sake of doing it but for the sake of being monitored by the DBE if they are for example teaching in line with the Annual Teaching Plan (ATP). Education officials or inspectors should help underperforming schools in all ways, especially with teaching and learning activities instead of paperwork. They need to support schools with teaching and learning, and not administration matters.

The external pressure exerted on underperforming schools by the education officials suffocates teachers, leading to pressure to get things in order before these officials come. Some of the precipitating factors for underperformance are beyond the control of teachers and schools at large. However, the DBE does not consider these causal factors when labelling these schools as underperformers. Being labelled as underperformers stigmatizes schools and thus affects the morale. This research paper established the views of schools on the intervention strategies of the DBE to understand if the DBE provides schools with the anticipated support. This study proposes strategies that can effectively support the underperforming schools. So, this paper was guided by two critical questions:

- **Aim:** To examines the stakeholder pressure from the Department of Basic Education on schools to shape and improve Grade 12 results.

- **Guiding research questions:**

How does the pressure from the Department of Basic Education contribute to the shaping and improvement of Grade 12 examination results?

What challenges do schools face when implementing intervention strategies from the Department of Basic Education?

Literature Review

Realities of Mandated School Improvement in Grade 12 Results

There are typically three areas of attention when reviewing research on the external pressures on struggling schools to improve Grade 12 results (Dietrichson et al., 2020). The first of these is accountability measures from a thorough historical perspective, carefully examining how different pressures have evolved to achieve quantifiable outcomes on national education systems. Second, examines several studies that explore the effects of modern accountability measures, including league tables, standardised test scores, and different inspection frameworks created because of educational policies (Näkk & Timoštšuk, 2021). Finally, the theoretical frameworks supporting these accountability measures and an examination of the various interpretations and meanings are frequent.

The complexities of external pressures on underperforming schools to significantly improve Grade 12 results in South Africa have been a contested terrain since the dawn of democracy. According to Alakebet (2018), external pressures are multifaceted and deeply intertwined with various socio-economic factors. The phenomenon of external pressure on schools to generally perform is not only a South African practice. In the United States, according to Zakaria, Samad & Omar (2013), there are standards and achievement scores that illustrate Adequate Yearly Progress. It is therefore expected that under this accountability system in the US, students' scholastic achievement will increase. However, such pressure has increased markedly, increasing the number of teachers avoiding working in underperforming schools (Johnson et al., 2013).

The described perspective presents a compelling hypothesis; however, it does not fully exploit its critical capacity concerning the complexities that have constituted a "contested terrain since the dawn of democracy." This phrase is indeed potent, yet it stands as a mere assertion without a direct connection to specific South African policies or historical transitions, such as the shift from Outcomes-Based Education (OBE) to the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) or the specific accountability mechanisms within the Department of Basic Education (DBE). Although Alakebet (2018) is cited to corroborate the socio-economic embedding of these pressures, the argument would benefit from moving beyond the general descriptor "multifaceted" to identify specific factors such as historical disparities in resources, language-in-education policies, or the socio-economic challenges faced by learners.

DBE's Dual Role in Delivering School Improvement in Grade 12 Results

The government of South Africa typically uses the Department of Basic Education (DBE) to exert external pressure on schools that are performing poorly. Ten years after the 'Batho Pele' White Paper was implemented for Post-Apartheid Public Service Delivery, historically underperforming schools still confront challenges. To improve the Grade 12 pass rates of poor schools in historically underperforming districts, the (DBE, through provincial departments, has implemented a wide range of policies, programmes, and initiatives (Lumadi, 2014). However, the actual outcomes of these implemented measures reveal a markedly different picture, demonstrating a concerning gap in both the comprehension of the issues at hand and the overall capacity of the GDE to effectively intervene and provide the necessary support that would enable schools to elevate their Grade 12 results meaningfully.

Spaull and Jansen (2019) provide a critical analysis of the South African educational system, highlighting its predominance of a "bureaucratic-compliance chain" over a "support-development chain." In this system, district officials are frequently obligated to prioritise the monitoring of policy compliance and the submission of reports instead of offering substantive pedagogical leadership at the grassroots level. This results in the external pressures from the Department of Basic Education (DBE) manifesting in schools as continuous demands for improved performance metrics, often occurring without a concomitant enhancement in operational capacity. Consequently, there persists a notable and enduring discrepancy between the intention of policies and their tangible outcomes, particularly in historically disadvantaged districts. The effectiveness of these interventions faces growing scrutiny due to systemic bottlenecks and a disconnect from the realities at the school level, which sabotage their potential. A study by Harber & Muthukrishna (2000) speaks to school improvement programs in the Eastern Cape revealed that interventions frequently fall short because they are standardised and fail to address the unique, context-specific challenges faced by individual schools, such as issues of leadership instability, deficient reading cultures, and linguistic diversity complexities. Moreover, the capacity of entities like the Gauteng Department of Education (GDE) to deliver differentiated support is frequently overstretched. As reported in the 2023 National Education Evaluation and Development Unit (NEEDU) report, many district officials, who serve as the critical connection between policy formulation and practical implementation, lack the specialised subject matter expertise and coaching skills necessary to effectively mentor teachers in key subjects such as Mathematics and the Language of Learning and Teaching (LoLT). This situation perpetuates a cycle wherein policies, despite being well-intentioned, are executed without the "necessary support" to facilitate substantial results.

Practices and Challenges in Delivering School Improvement in Grade 12 Results

In terms of practices and challenges in delivering school improvement in grade 12 results, except Free State province, other provinces like Limpopo, KwaZulu-Natal, Mpumalanga, Eastern Cape and North-West continue to lag well behind the expected performance benchmarks, according to research that focuses on the underperforming schools in the Tshwane North District (Kunoethe et al., 2021). Various provincial and national administrations have had to courageously step in and adopt a variety of tactics in these provinces to push for improvements and make them attain competitive educational performance results that are comparable to those of the provinces above them. In the case of Tshwane North, the Gauteng Department of Education (GDE) has implemented several strategies aimed at improving educational outcomes in underperforming schools. One such initiative is the School Improvement Programme (SIP), which focuses on providing targeted support to schools identified as underperforming. These programmes include measures such as curriculum adjustments, capacity building for educators, and infrastructure development (GDE, 2024). The immense pressure on both the schools and the district itself is enormous; it reaches levels of intensity that lead stakeholders to realise that something beyond the typical interventions is desperately needed to facilitate genuine progress, yet the necessary resources to enact such changes often fall short (Hoadley et al., 2016). Much like the scenario of pushing children towards academic success, the invisible pressure mounts and can become overwhelming, ultimately affecting the dynamics within the educational environment for everyone involved. When the expectations become too high and the means of achieving them are insufficient, it can lead to complex challenges that are difficult to alleviate for both educational staff and students alike. While these interventions are designed to enhance school performance, they also introduce additional layers of accountability and expectations, which can be perceived as pressure by school administrators and teachers (Ordofa & Asgedom, 2022).

In our analysis, the scholarly perspectives appropriately underscore the significant pressure and the necessity for interventions extending beyond the conventional Grade 12 measures. However, this critical observation remains largely an assertion rather than serving as a foundation for a more profound critique. The discourse does not, for example, elucidate the correlation between such pressures and the potential for adverse outcomes, such as teaching-to-the-test, data manipulation, or educator burnout. These aspects would considerably strengthen the argument that the interventions themselves may contribute to a multifaceted and potentially detrimental cycle. The central tension—that well-intentioned support mechanisms introduce burdensome accountability is accurately acknowledged, yet it warrants a more thorough investigation into the tangible implications for the schools and districts that these programs aim to support.

Theoretical framework

This article is foregrounded on the principle of complexity. Edgar Morin, who promoted a transdisciplinary approach that highlights the interdependence of knowledge and the necessity of holistic education, is frequently regarded as a founding figure in the field of complexity and systems theory in education (Morin, 2008). Furthermore, by investigating constructivist principles and the implications of complexity theory for creating learning environments that represent the dynamic nature of knowledge acquisition, David H. Jonassen has made a substantial contribution to this topic (Jonassen, 1996). This theory(s) is based on complexity because it speaks to the issue of underperformance as a complex issue that is located in areas of significant disadvantage, rural, coastal, poverty levels, and other contextual factors that all contribute to schools struggling in the area of underperformance in Grade 12. This can then also be situated within a complex education system that schools and Grade 12s find themselves in, notwithstanding the socio-political intersections that are often brought into play for learners in Grade 12 (Boswell, 2024), their teachers, and the principals of schools who are low performers. The complexity theory paradigm is a useful lens for comprehending systems, such as schools, that are firmly anchored in their surroundings and whose evolution is influenced by the interactions of their constituent parts (Fidan & Balci, 2017). Another method to view underperforming schools is to link and apply the theory of complex adaptive systems, which can help Grade 12 learners and educators as a system with numerous interdependent components that affect and influence learners' progress. Put differently, school operations and functioning, which include Grade 12 results because this is often exclusively used as a measurement to test a school's performance, continuous assessment adapts and evolves with a changing environment because no phenomenon like under-performance of Grade 12 results is ever constant.

Since the results of Grade 12 underperformance are not consistent, this theory fits very well in this study because systems require reorganization and adaptation to the problems caused by their surroundings without being separated from the governing system and accountable officers in the form of teachers, subject heads, and ultimately principles (Özen & Yavuz, 2024). This issue needs to be addressed and discussions and recommendations should be made from a systems approach. A low-performing school's environment is made up of various elements, and elements both inside and outside the school can impact the educational system.

Method

This qualitative exploration sought to understand the multifaceted external pressures facing Grade 12 teachers by exploring participants' perspectives. An interpretive paradigm was employed to facilitate a deeper understanding of individual experiences (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020) on academic underperformance of Grade 12 learners. The study utilised purposive

sampling, allowing the researcher to intentionally select participants who were most likely to provide valuable insights (Myers, 2019). A total of 10 participants were drawn from a secondary school in the Tshwane North district, Gauteng province. A focus group discussion was deemed the most appropriate method for this study because it offered the researcher an opportunity to delve into participants' thoughts, feelings, and motivations through open-ended questions (Gill, 2018). Thematic analysis was used to analyse the transcribed data, primarily focusing on identifying patterns and themes within the qualitative dataset (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). Ethical clearance was obtained from the university, and permission to conduct the study was secured from the Gauteng Department of Basic Education. All participants signed informed consent which outlined the preserving of their anonymity as well as their voluntary participation.

Findings

Presentation of findings

We indicated in the previous section that data were analysed thematically. The codes were developed, and thereafter, themes were constructed using codes. This section presents themes that emerged from the data. The participants for this study were 10 Grade 12 teachers, and were referred to this study as T1, T2, T3, T4, T5, T6, T7, T8, T9 and T10. Findings revealed four themes that are discussed below, namely, the pressure to produce good results without adequate support from the Department of Basic Education (DBE), challenges of teaching progressed learners, challenges of implementing the Annual Teaching Plan (ATP), and frustration about failure to address challenges impacting academic performance.

Pressure to produce good results without adequate support from the Department of Basic Education (DBE)

The findings suggest that the DBE officials mostly care about the good and improvement of Grade 12 results but do not consider other contextual factors that impact results. Assertions from participants support these arguments.

T3: "When the results drop, they look at you... they don't look at what is wrong from the foundation phase."

T10: "The district... they'll tell you that 80% Nothing less. So, we sometimes as grade 12 teachers... we become frustrated because they expect us to do things that are not possible."

These expressions from teachers suggest that teachers are put under pressure to improve Grade 12 results without adequate support from the DBE. The DBE does not consider what happens in previous grades, but its focus is on Grade 12 results. It is clear, from the findings, that Grade 12 teachers become frustrated by the demand from DBE to produce an 80% or more on results, whereas the DBE does not provide the necessary support and required resources to Grade 12 teachers. The bad results only invite pressure from outside to come and enquire about what is happening in school but the support the DBE offers is inadequate.

Challenges of teaching Progressed Learners

The findings show that Grade 12 teachers face challenges of teaching progressed learners. This is confirmed by the following assertions from participants:

T1: "With the issue of progressing some of the learners, you will find that in the next Grade, those learners have a knowledge gap, and that is difficult when you reach grade 11 or grade 12."

T4: "It is very difficult to teach and accommodate progressed learners because some do not even do the work you give them to do; they don't do it, but in the end, if they fail, the blame comes to you as a teacher".

According to participants, progressed learners show signs of a knowledge gap when they have progressed. The participants assert that the knowledge gap manifests itself more when progressing learners are doing Grade 11 and or Grade 12. The findings further show that some progressed learners do not do the schoolwork that teachers give them. However, what worries teachers more is that teachers are to blame if the same progressed learners do not perform well academically. So, progressed learners put pressure on teachers to improve academic performance.

Challenges of implementing the Annual Teaching Plan (ATP)

Some Grade 12 teachers have a problem implementing the ATPs. These ATPs exert another pressure to complete tasks in time, regardless of whether teaching and learning are effective or not. Assertions from participants support this:

T6: *"ATP is our biggest problem. We have progressed learners here and ATP here. The DBE expects us to complete tasks at stipulated dates; on the other hand, support progressed learners who need more time and attention".*

T7: *"We have to rush to cover the ATP... if you're covering only the ATP, then those learners who are struggling, you won't even be able to assist them."*

According to participants, teachers face the cumbersome task of implementing ATPs. Their problem is that ATPs dictate what they should do and when they should do that. This compels them to rush to complete activities, thus not giving more attention to learners struggling with grasping the content; teachers end up under pressure to complete activities without ensuring effective teaching and learning.

Frustration about failure to address challenges impacting academic performance

The Grade 12 teachers are frustrated by the DBE, which cannot address the existing challenges within the underperforming schools. The failure to recognize challenges means that these challenges persist, which impacts curriculum implementation. The following assertions complement this claim:

T2: *"Our department does not recognize challenges that make some schools underperform; the only thing they care about is documents about lesson plans, year programs, and implementation of ATPs."*

T5: *"The DBE only cares about checking how far you are with ATP and lesson planning but not establishing why Grade 12 learners are not performing well".*

T8: *"They don't focus on the highest because they say no, you must push this 2% to have level 2... because this thing it must be; I must push, and they must also push even the parent must push."*

T9: *"The only thing they are good at, is making us run around collecting and showing them papers which do not go to class and teach but do not worry about problems making Grade 12 learners underperform".*

The findings demonstrate that the DBE pays little attention to issues that underpin academic performance, but they only come to schools to check and verify if teachers have proper curriculum documents. The engagement between DBE officials and teachers is not based on underlying problems for underperformance but on how far they are progressing with ATPs and whether they have all the required documents. According to the participants, the DBE does not play its role as expected, but expects teachers to assume their teaching responsibilities properly. The findings show that when DBE officials come to schools, teachers run around to submit the correct documents that officials want to confirm that they have.

Discussion of findings

It is a reality that underperforming schools are frequently polarised as good or bad, and those schools that fail to hit the mark are fair game for media attention and ripe for some sort

of public, external intervention (Harris & Jones, 2022). The pressure from outside the school about academic underperformance to account for the underperformance is like a monster for Grade 12 teachers. Instead of motivating and assisting them to improve results, teachers become more frustrated. In light of the above, Chang (2009) argues that although an emerging body of evidence has shown that the external pressure on low-performing schools can raise performance in the short run, the extent to which these improvements are due to schools' manipulation of the accountability system has remained uncertain. Their frustration is underpinned by the lack of adequate support from the outside world to ameliorate their academic performance. The participants feel pressured by the DBE to improve Grade 12 results, whereas the DBE does not provide adequate support, including funding, staffing, and training systems theory employed in this study, alludes to creating learning environments that represent the dynamic nature of knowledge acquisition (Morin, 2008). The responsibility of the DBE is to create an enabling environment that can enhance curriculum implementation. Teachers expect support from DBE to ensure they can undertake teaching and learning activities efficiently. In support of the above notion, Harris and Jones (2022) argue that schools do not improve through fear, bullying, over-reporting, more bureaucracy, more external pressure, and inadequate levels of support. Getting the balance of pressure and support is, consequently, an important and imperative leadership skill. However, if the DBE does not create a conducive environment for teachers to implement the curriculum, learners are bound to underperform. The DBE should align its purpose of visiting schools with strategies for improving educational outcomes (Gauteng Department of Education, 2024), and this should be done holistically. While the DBE sets targets for the percentage to be obtained by schools, it should also align its services with those targets. One of the strategies that can be employed is to ensure a regularly scheduled assessments are provided to teachers with data by which they could monitor student progress and modify the instruction to address areas of weak performance (Chang, 2009).

Furthermore, findings show that teachers are seriously challenged when teaching progressed learners. Seemingly, if they had a say about progressed learners, they would not allow them to progress since they did not meet the minimum requirements for progression, but only progressed due to the progression policy. Participants feel that progressed learners have a knowledge gap. This knowledge gap burdens teachers since they are expected to provide extra support for the progressed learners to progress to the next grade or complete school. Kunoethe et al. (2021) argue that some provinces lag behind in Grade 12 academic performance. In line with the arguments from participants, progressed learners contribute to this underperformance. The complexity theory articulates that underperformance is a complex issue (Morin, 2008) because it has multifaceted causal factors, and progressed learners are one of them. Also, complexity and systems theory emphasise the need to reorganize and adapt to the problems caused by the surroundings (Morin, 2008). Therefore, the problem of progressed learners should not be for teachers only; other stakeholders should come to the party.

Grade 12 teachers are unhappy with the nature of Annual Teaching Plans (ATPs). The findings reveal that ATP compels teachers to complete tasks on specific dates, which sometimes forces them to rush to complete tasks without effective teaching and learning. The contextual factors should be considered when teaching. As curriculum implementers, teachers are expected to teach learners sometimes under unconducive conditions. However, ATPs do not take that into account. For example, teachers are expected to support progressed learners, but ATP does not consider that. Implementing ATP accordingly means that teachers neglect learners struggling with content knowledge because they may not complete tasks in time if they do. In line with the complexity and systems theory, constituent parts must interact (Fidan & Balci, 2017). This means that the interaction between DBE and teachers should materialise to improve academic performance. However, if teachers are unhappy with ATP, its implementation may be shambled. Alakebet (2018) laments that multifaceted and deeply intertwined socio-economic factors shape

teaching and learning. However, it seems like the ATP does not consider these socio-economic factors. The DBE only cares about completing tasks, regardless of whether learners are served well with content knowledge.

Teachers are frustrated over the DBE, which focuses on having good academic results but does not address the challenges that impact results. The DBE should also engage teachers to establish if working conditions are conducive. It should not be about what teachers are not doing well, as it seems, but also about how to support teachers and what issues negatively impact the results. The DBE should spread its wings and consider other socio-economic and contextual factors that affect teaching and learning. Suppose the DBE can work closely with teachers and diagnose issues that stand in the way of success for teachers and learners. In that case, they can create learning environments that enable knowledge acquisition (Morin, 2008) as per systems theory. This can bring awareness of what should be done to enforce good results and bolster interactions between the DBE and teachers (Fidan & Balci, 2017). Johnson et al. (2013) affirm that the underperformance of schools can demotivate teachers from working in underperforming schools. Working together with the DBE and teachers will not only ameliorate school results but also increase the desire for teachers to work in those schools.

Conclusion

This paper examined the external pressure on underperforming schools to shape and improve their National Senior Certificate (Grade 12) results. Based on the findings of this study, the conclusion is that the underperforming schools are put under a lot of pressure to shape and improve Grade 12 results, but the DBE does not provide the necessary support. These pressures range from lack of parental involvement, progressive learners, government mandates, policies and insufficient teachers, among other things. Some of the contributors to underperformance are beyond the control of schools but require the intervention of the DBE. So, without the support from the DBE, some underperforming schools may continue underperforming since they need external support. This study further concludes that teachers from underperforming schools find it difficult to deal with progressed learners in the midst of learners who have progressed by meeting requirements. Teaching these two sets of learners in one class causes problems for teachers since they need to offer different support to these different sets of learners; hence, some teachers struggle to teach progressed learners.

This study also concludes that teachers from underperforming schools face challenges in implementing the Annual Teaching Plan (ATP). ATP prescribes what should be done and when that should be done. This becomes a problem for teachers since there are contextual factors that interfere with the implementation of teaching and learning activities. However, the ATP does not cater for these factors. In the end, teachers find it difficult to implement ATP accordingly due to contextual factors. Lastly, this study concludes that teachers are frustrated by the failure of the SMT to deal with issues that impact curriculum implementation. This agrees with the notion that leadership is the key contributor to the improvement of underperforming schools. There are no quick fixes that school leaders can deploy; every school improves in its own way at its own pace (Harris & Jones, 2022). Teachers face many challenges, some of which impact the facilitation of teaching and learning activities. These challenges are brought to the attention of SMT with the hope of resolving them. However, SMT does not attend to these challenges amicably and thus frustrates teachers who are curriculum implementers.

Recommendations

The findings reveal that the DBE expects and pressures schools to improve and produce good results, but it does not provide the support that teachers anticipate. Therefore, the DBE

should work closely with underperforming schools to understand the conditions they operate under and offer necessary support that can enable conducive conditions from which to produce better and improve results. The DBE should understand that it is also accountable for the bad results; hence, it should play its role without fail so that teachers can feel supported and play their role to ameliorate Grade 12 results.

Teaching progressed learners is a challenge for teachers in underperforming schools, especially because they are taught in the same class with learners who have progressed after meeting progression requirements. The DBE should keep a regular check on teachers about these learners to understand how these learners are progressing. This can enable the DBE to identify issues that bother teachers and address them promptly. Also, this can enable teachers to report issues that may hinder the achievement of these progressed learners.

Teachers face the challenge of implementing the ATP. The DBE needs to rethink the way the ATP is structured. It should accommodate disturbances that interfere with its implementation. The DBE should not pretend that they do not understand contextual factors that negatively impact the implementation of teaching and learning activities. The failure of the SMT to address challenges and their impact on curriculum implementation is another problem for teachers. The SMT needs to revitalise their understanding of roles and responsibilities with the help of the DBE. The DBE should also strengthen its monitoring strategy on the functioning of the SMT. This can enable the DBE to identify areas where its intervention is required, not only amongst learners and teachers but also amongst teachers and the SMT. We further state that schools that are not performing well need to respond to pressures of greater accountability while trying to deal with the myriad of complex internal challenges that they face. Teachers should also be motivated to put extra effort into helping learners understand the content and thus improve academic performance. Communities need to take responsibility for their children's learning. They need to be made to understand that they have a role to play in the academic performance of learners; it is not only the responsibility of teachers.

Limitations

This study, while providing valuable insights, has several limitations that must be recognised. First, the research was carried out solely in the Tshwane North District of the Gauteng Department of Education, which restricts the generalisability of the findings to other districts or provinces that may have different contextual realities, resource levels, and stakeholder dynamics. Second, the study relied on qualitative data generated from a limited number of participants, including principals, teachers, and district officials. This may not sufficiently represent the broader range of stakeholder experiences and perceptions. Third, the findings were based on participants' self-reported experiences and opinions, which could have been affected by social desirability bias or fear of repercussions, especially given the sensitive nature of discussions around accountability and performance pressures. Fourth, time constraints limited the depth of longitudinal analysis, reducing the ability to assess how stakeholder pressures develop over time and their long-term effects on Grade 12 results.

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