

## **The Inevitable Pressure Between Progression And Knowledge Impartation**

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### **Abstract**

It has always been the case that teachers must produce a higher pass-rate to the managers. Due to this expectation, at some point lazy students get to rest well knowing that the teacher will have to make a plan to push them to pass. This has many implications like; (a) a teacher has to create intellectually weak assessments, (b) adjust the marks after giving assessments and students failed, or (c) having to account to the managers after having a low pass-rate. The serious issue with this situation is the harsh approach of the management towards the teacher who obtained a low pass-rate. S/he gets viciously blamed and confronted as if there cannot be any other factors that lead to a low pass-rate. The management's approach is commonly bias towards supporting the learners at the unfair exposition of the teacher. Research methods include document analysis and semi-structured interviews within the education sector. Results of this study show that this kind of approach towards education management creates a power exercise dilemma between students and teachers. This victimization of teachers by students after the bias approach to the issue of lower pass-rate is even getting emphasized by some policies like progression policy that says 'no student must repeat the class 2 times. This pressurizes the teacher as it makes it seem like it is a guaranteed fact that the student will improve after failing once. It is the conclusion of this paper that such misguided philosophy of the educational management must be put under logical scrutiny and be corrected for quality teaching and assessment. Using analytic theory, this qualitative study explores different ways in which low pass-rate issue can be addressed without creating power exercise dilemma which ends up supporting students' laziness and protests after obtaining low pass-rate.

**Keywords:** *Teaching And Learning; Quality Assessment; Pass-Rate; Strategic Approach*

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The matter of progression or pass-rate of learners and the management's expectations have always been an issue in both basic education as well as higher education. In basic education there is a progression policy which emphasizes that even if a student does not meet requirements to be promoted, but if s/he repeating already s/he must be progressed (Dube and Ndaba, 2021; Masrom et al, 2021). This, prima facie sounds laudable and good for the learners in some schools. Kirpatrick (2019) argues however that there is a serious challenge with teaching such students who have been progressed. The challenge is that some of them do not get ready for the grade they have been progressed to. Being not ready in this case makes the learner perform poorly in that grade, and some of them even have a negative attitude towards teachers and studying because they know that they will have to be progressed again to the next grade. According to Kelland (2020) an addition to this learner-friendly policy is the rule that teachers cannot discipline learners in the way they deem fit, to such an extent that some of the truths are even considered as threatening the learners. At the same time, Fourie (2019) seems to have made a valid point when he said that sometimes learners need to be told the bad results of being lazy and disrespectful at school in order to bring their morality up to the standard. This argument is valid because this is the basis on which all moral laws of the world are made, to such an extent that even the classical texts like the bible bear evidence of using the same method (Hand, 2020). Having all these issues in basic education, there happens to be a rise in underperformance of

learners in some schools and a widespread of ill-mannered learners who even go and write examinations without thorough preparations or preparations at all.

Scholars like De Vries et al (2018), Kassarning et al (2018), Hand (2020), and Masrom et al (2021) have conducted research on the areas of lower pass-rate in South African rural schools, pressure on teachers to produce higher pass-rate, schools' dysfunctionality, introduction and implementation of new policies. But, the issue of the power dilemma and the pressure of teachers trying to comply with the DBE progression policy has not been explored, hence it is explored in this study. The non exploration of this matter in academia is alarming because this is an issue that many teachers in different South African public schools are battling with as it now shows to have a negative impact on the overall development of learners towards lifelong learning. Therefore, Scholars like Masrom et al (2021) help in widening thoughts about education policies and their implementation in schools, hence the researchers in this study found a space to argue about injustices brought by this DBE progression policy in South African public schools. At the university level where students face difficulties with the so-called difficult assessments no literature has reported anything except the trending videos of students protesting and leaving the exam venues chanting. It is at that space that this study had to be explorative in finding the causes of students reaching the university level while not being ready for critically challenging assessments. The issue of management adding more pressure on academics comes from the studies conducted by Fourie (2019) and Hand (2020) and for some reasons unbeknown to the researchers of this study, they also do not show management as powerful enough to remind students about acceptable behaviors which would include the measures taken by management to discipline students who chant that some lecturers must go and walk out of the examination hall. The main focus of this paper is on educational management officials who give pressure to the teachers while enforcing learner-friendly policies. The expectation that teachers must produce higher pass-rate every year, regardless of what kind of learners they are teaching gives an unparalleled pressure to the teachers who face different kind of challenges in classrooms (DeVries et al, 2018; Kssarning et al, 2018). This pressure ends up forcing that any teacher must think of three possible assessment outcomes before assessing. Those options are; (a) make the assessment be easier so that at least the majority of learners pass. In that case, the quality of assessment gets highly compromised, (b) create a standard quality assessment and adjust the marks when learners do not pass to a level that at least the majority passes. In that case as well it seems that the quality of assessment would be still compromise or the report would not be a true reflection of learners' performance. The last of them is (c) the option whereby the teacher would set the assessment at the proper level and record marks for submission as they are. In the last case, the teacher then would be subject to the harsh call to come and account in managerial offices as if it can be proven beyond reasonable doubt that s/he is the major contributor to the lower pass-rate. While it is traumatizing enough to be called to account in those offices, the management officials handle the questioning and reporting in a way that further discomforts the teacher and favor the learners (Fourie, 2019; Hand, 2020).

Besides the unfriendliness and unfairness of this accounting method, in higher education as well some lecturers get called to account if they obtain a lower pass-rate in their module/s. That accounting process is handled in a way that the lecturer is depicted as an enemy of progress to such an extent that students feel justified in all their faults that led to failing. Nonetheless, the deeper problem that comes with this whole exercise is that students suffer power-exercise dilemma. Power-exercise dilemma refers to a situation whereby students consider themselves as equal with the management to the extent of protesting and chanting that a particular lecturer must go.

## RESEARCH METHODS

According to De Vries et al (2018) qualitative research is done to present views and analysis rather than statistical data. This qualitative study relies on document analysis, semi-structured interviews, as well as video reviews. Documents like progression policy of Department of Basic Education (DBE) in South Africa form an integral part of this study as they speak to the core subject of this paper. For semi-structured interviews, 4 university student participants, 4 teachers, and 4 lecturers from one South African university have been purposefully sampled. Ethical clearance certificate with reference number TREC/226/2024:PG was issued by the University of Limpopo with guidelines after carefully assessing the proposal of this study and found that there are no grounds for any conflict of interests. Participants were contacted via WhatsApp and their voluntary consent to participate in this study was acquired before a short questionnaire was shared with them. Following their agreement to participate in the study, following questions were shared with them; (1) do learners always improve their performance after failing a class/ grade? (2) is it always a teacher's fault that learners fail? (3) is progression policy doing justice to teachers when it demands that no learner must repeat a grade more than once? (4) is there quality teaching and assessment when the teacher fears being called to account after obtaining a low pass-rate? (5) is there any academic freedom in the university where students can protest and demand a lecturer's dismissal due to setting a difficult assessment? and their responses were carefully recorded. It was purposefully designed that WhatsApp be means of communication to avoid a situation whereby gathering of all participants in one place interferes with the responses.

All participants in this study were assured of their anonymity, hence the reference to them is hereby indicated as participants. According to Dube and Ndaba (2021) participants must be anonymized in research in order to protect them from harm that may befall them if it gets known that they reported the particular information that they did. Video review hereby refers to the online/ Youtube videos whereby students protest and demand that a particular lecturer must leave of change the difficult way of assessing them. In line with analytic theoretical framework, data from all these sources will be thematically analyzed in order to lead to progressive recommendations and subsequently a logical conclusion. With all the guidelines and rules hereby followed, researchers do ascertain that there is no conflict of interests among researchers, funders, and any other possible contributor to this study. For further enforcement of reliability, this study was represented in a South African Sociology Association in Education (SASEA) conference in the University of Western Cape where it was critiqued and further contributions from other scholars were received. It is against that backdrop that the researchers hereby considered to add three layers of interpretation upon thematic analysis, and those are; (a) textual interpretation which considers the text/ event as written/ occurring, (b) contextual interpretation which looks at the context in which the text was written/ event took place, and (c) substantive interpretation which looks at the relevance/ purport of the event itself as it occurred, thereby analyzing the behavior of the actors as well as the nature of the phenomenon (Ntshangase, 2024).

### **Theoretical framework**

This study is committed to the analytic school of thought. According to McGinn (2002) analytical philosophy emphasizes clarity and argument, that is commonly attained through logical and linguistic analysis. Frege (1906) is considered as the father of analytical philosophy, a tradition that emphasizes on clarity of argument through the logical use of language in presenting thoughts. Within this framework Bertrand Russell found a space to argue for logicism and logical atomism (Soames, 2003). According to Soames (2003) Logicism and logical atomism refers to the practice of breaking the argument into basic propositions in order to

understand how coherent are those components that comprise the whole. Similarly, Hallen and Sodipo (1997) argue for the analytical breakdown of issues to the simpler and logical thoughts through the use of logic in a simple ordinary language. Soames (2003) seems to hold a view that philosophical problems arise from misunderstanding of language and all necessary truths are a priori, analytic and true in virtue if meaning of words depend upon how the world truly is. Analytic theory helps in producing philosophy that is not ideologically motivated, but thought that is analytic and reflective (Hallen, 2005). Under Wittgenstein's (1937) inspiration, Carnap (1961) sought to embed his analysis in logical positivism as a development to this tradition. Logical positivism holds that there are no specific philosophical truths and that the object of philosophy is logical clarification of thoughts (Soames, 2003). Carnap (1937) and other scholars contributed to this tradition by rejecting the doctrines of their predecessors of constructing artificial language to resolve philosophical problems. According to Glock (2008: 44) those philosophers like Carnap collectively argued that the Vienna Circle was erroneous because the "quest for systemic theories of language worked as a misleading intrusion of scientific methods into philosophy" (Glock, 2008: 44).

The analytic framework in this research study helps in acquiring a profound or adequate understanding of the research problem prior to forwarding our own views. Since it is the theoretical framework that guides this research methodology, it also helps in the application of critical analysis that cannot be accusable of any biasness. This theoretical framework enables researchers to be reflective and at the same time be within guards of rationality while being critical of their thoughts. With the guide of logical positivism and criticality of thought, this paper has been able to deal with incoherencies and ideological speculations around the issue of inevitable pressure between progression and knowledge impartation in South Africa while operating as a neutral being that is interested on learning more about educational policies and practices in education. As Soames (2003) argue that logical positivism holds that there are no absolute philosophical truths, but the object of philosophy is to clarify thoughts, this has helped to simplify researchers' thoughts in this study. This paper commits itself to the use of ordinary language in producing critical thoughts while at the same time analyzing the common ideas that inform practice in the South African education system. Analytic theoretical framework is adequately relevant when dealing with the critical issues like this one of quality assessments, pass-rate and educational management because other scholars talk about these issues at a peripheral level and never get deeper into rationality and core of what effects it has on quality education and victimized academics.

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

- (a) All participants argue that it is not always the case that students improve their behavior towards their studies after failing a class/ grade.
- (b) All participants/ teachers, lecturers, and learners argue that it is not always a teacher's fault that learners fail, but mostly the attitude that learners have towards their studies.
- (c) All participants argue that the South African progression policy is flawed because it advocates laziness on those learners who are repeaters of some grades with the knowledge that they will have to be progressed at the end of the year regardless of their poor performance.
- (d) Quality of teaching and assessment gets lost as teachers fear being called to account after obtaining a low pass-rate because that process intimidates the teacher.

(e) All participants agree that there is no academic freedom if lecturers get threats of dismissal from students for setting difficult assessments within the content they taught.

**1. It is a flawed and biased assumption by DBE that learners will always better their academic performance after failing a grade, and their poor academic performance is the teachers' fault.**

According to Harris et al (2022) being not promoted from one grade to the next with one's friends is shameful, and it might make some learners consider themselves less worthy. At times failing a grade does make students change their attitude and show signs of having learned from the mistakes of the previous year (Almusharraf, 2022). Bennedsen and Caspersen (2019) argue that it is faulty to view poor academic performance as always a teacher's fault because the teacher is not the only factor that influences teaching, learning, and assessment. The South African DBE with their progression policy seems to be orthodoxically holding on the assumption that all learners get ashamed of their failing and improve their academic performance while that is not always the case. According to some teachers, *"the bias view that a good teacher can be judged on the basis of high pass-rate of learners is flawed because there are many factors that affect learners' pass-rate"*. They argue that some learners get affected by negative peer pressure and not pay enough attention to their studies regardless of their status of being repeaters of that particular grade. Sometimes good teachers in terms of expertise and experience get challenged by carelessness of learners who are not motivated to apply due diligence in their academic work (Puwanto, 2022). For clarity sake, Khan et al (2022) argue that peer pressure can be explained as either positive or negative because sometimes learners happen to influence one another in a way that improves their academic performance while inverse happens at times. So far, progression policy with that clause of *"no learner must repeat one grade twice"* ignores that sometimes learners get progressed before being ready for the next grade. It is with the consideration of that view that this paper argues that the implementation of this progression policy in schools does no good than putting pressure on teachers who have to progress learners and avoid being called to account for low pass-rate.

**1.1. The DBE's progression policy is faulty because it Favors lazy students to continue being not serious with their studies knowing that they are guaranteed a pass at the end of the year.**

DBE progression policy seems to be based on the idea that learners must be in the same class with their agemates/ peers (Aphane, 2022). According to Han (2021) age does not always represent the same level of maturity or development in learners. Okoji and Sulaiman (2021) similarly argue that progression without proven merits sometimes puts learners in grades that are above their cognitive level. Sometimes learners who are lazy to study feel comforted by this progression policy and not improve due to the fact that the policy demands that they must keep being progressed (Jena et al, 2022). This study agrees with Jena et al (2022) view that learning cannot only be represented by the number of progressions and higher pass-rate, but knowledge is a core component for grade competence. In fact, Harris et al (2022) argue elsewhere that competence in any field of study is obtained through keeping on studying and learning from failures than avoiding them. This paper builds on that argument to forward the idea that pushing learners to the next grade while they are not fit somehow kills the spirit of quality learners who will be proud of their meritorious competence. In other words, DBE progression policy should have stipulated some conditions that must be met before a learner can be progressed rather than demanding that no learner must repeat a class more than once.

Mosher (2022) rightly argues that passing a grade should substantively have a prestigious meaning about the capability of the learner, not merely a matter of passing time. In South Africa, DBE firstly made the pass mark to be 30% average which does not help any learner with entry/

admission into any university after matric or grade 12 (Maimane, 2022). The recent progression policy comes in a way to add more to the demolition of quality in the South African educational system. Perhaps DBE should have pre-checked this policy as a pilot test for 3 years and assess the damage it does to quality of produced learners for which after that 3 years they would have come back to discuss and revise it. To clear the matter, this paper does not argue for stagnation of learners in the same grades that they are repeating, but the argument here is that moving a learner to the next grade must have a quality meaning attached to it. Therefore, policies being produced by DBE for implementation purposes should be audited and be confirmed for promoting quality rather than quantity of progressed learners.

### **1.1.2 Calling a teacher to account for a low pass-rate intimidates teachers and compromise quality because it assumes that the teacher is a cause of low performance or should have done something to push students to pass the grade.**

In any company there are always targets to be reached and expectations to be met by employees (Ali-Alshehail et al, 2022), and perhaps that is what the progression policy seeks to establish in DBE. According to Hamdan (2018) calling someone to account for not meeting up with the expectations or reaching the target normally comes when the target was made clear in the performance management tool. From the look of things, DBE expects that all schools must have a high pass-rate and that is what teachers should strive to achieve. Sam (2020) argues that the current form of calling teachers to account intimidates them because it has an underlying connotation that a teacher has not done what s/he should have done. Additionally, teachers do not come back with any reasonable advice or plan to help them improve their teaching and assessment to achieve higher pass-rate. One lecturer actually revealed that in some universities lecturers also get called to account as students protest and demand a better pass mark after writing a test and find themselves to have poorly performed. According to one of the participants the parties called to the meeting where a lecturer has to account are intimidating because they include student representative council (SRC) which takes pleasure in threatening lecturers even in the social media. Butakor and Dziwornu (2018) argue that the assumption that the teacher is a cause of students' failure is frustrating when mentioned together with calling teachers to account for a low pass-rate while no one ever thinks of calling students to account for their high failure rate.

At the rock bottom, this whole idea of a teacher being the factor that fails students puts pressure on teachers such that they end up having to do anything possible to push students to pass. One of the lecturers among participants argues that a teacher/ lecturer may end up having to; (a) set substandard assessments so that all learners pass tests and examinations, (b) adjust assessment marks favorably after assessments have been failed, or (c) facing the SMT and circuit manager (equivalent to UMT and SRC in the university) after obtaining a low pass-rate, which is an undesirable exercise. This study argues that all three options mentioned above do not favor quality education production, rather all this effectively puts pressure and ensures that quantitative pass-rate is achieved. Hitherto, this issue of pressurizing teachers to have a high pass-rate against all odds seems to have recently started to overspill from DBE to some universities as the next section of this study discusses the issue of lecturers crying for academic freedom.

### **1.1.3 There is no academic freedom if university students have liberty to threaten lecturers with dismissal after setting challenging assessments from the content they taught.**

In one of the South African universities a video was circulating whereby students were disruptively refusing to write a test because they say it is difficult. After that whole dramatic incident, a poor helpless lecturer had to go through a round of interrogative meetings whereby student leadership had a chance to chant the dismissal of that particular lecturer. According to Buttler (2017) academic freedom would include that a lecturer has freedom to assess as s/he deems fit within the scope of what has been taught. The argument here is that favoring students more than necessary tends to disfavor the teacher/ lecturer in different ways. Another frustrating

issue as one lecturer among participants revealed is that the matter of performance appraisals keeps being debated while there is already a brutal way of dealing with people who seem to be not producing the expected performance results. It is against that backdrop that this study argues that there seems to be some form of unreasonableness in handling the demand for high pass-rate in both DBE and Higher Education Institutions (HEI's). But, at the end it all boils down to the fact that discussions should be channeled towards helping teachers and lecturers who face the situation of obtaining a low pass-rate than intimidating or chastising them. In the next section this study levels some of the points that may help in laying a good foundation towards proper intervention in this case of quality teaching and assessment. However, it is worth noting that this study perceives the trauma that being called to account as a teacher or lecturer after obtaining a low pass-rate induces, and for good mental health in the workplace such kind of situations should be addressed properly.

### **1.2. Recommendations**

After carefully analyzing the findings of this study, researchers deem it fit to give their opinion as recommendations of what may be done to remedy the situation in the South African educational system. Among other points that one may suggest, this study recommends the following; (a) DBE must improve their public participation before passing any idea/ regulation into a policy and find out later/ during implementation that it might be bias, (b) lower pass-rate must be dealt with in a way that seeks to improve the teacher/ lecturer rather than being intimidating or setting out an idea that the teacher/ lecturer is a problem, (c) university management team (UMT) and school management team (SMT) must devise a proper way to address the situation of power exercise dilemma before it gets to the level whereby students deem themselves powerful enough to decide which lecturer/ teacher must be expelled due to assessing differently to what students wish, (d) since calling teachers to account after obtaining a low pass-rate pressurizes and intimidate teachers, there should be some psychological intervention if teachers go to account for obtaining a lower pass-rate than expected. It is these points that this study puts forward as possible suggestions towards fostering quality teaching and assessment within South African education system.

## **CONCLUSION**

This paper has discussed the inconsistencies in the DBE progression policy which suggest that the policy values result more than the quality of teaching and assessment. It is quite surprising that even some learners realize that the kind of favoritism perpetrated by DBE progression policy has a negative effect on them when they reach university level. A power exercise dilemma gets created as the school/ university management overly favors students with some bias against lecturers/ teachers, thereby arming students to even demand how they must be assessed. The pressure against teachers to produce a high pass-rate in schools undermines the production of quality teaching and assessment, hence learners end up feeling entitled to substandard or easy assessments. When the UMT/ SMT calls lecturers/ teachers to account about the lower pass-rate of students they serve as an intimidating factor which makes academics seem like the reason why students are failing. Further research needs to be done in order to establish factors that would make a teacher/ lecturer be the cause of low pass-rate. Furthermore, perhaps the revision of the participation process before passing an idea into policy is needed as it shows that some educational policies have defects both contextually and substantively. All in all, so far it seems that the South African DBE progression policy does injustice to the production of quality teaching and assessment as it is greatly based on unfounded presumptions/ assumptions.

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