



RESEARCH ARTICLE

2023, vol. 10, issue 1, 225-233

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.8151125>

DEPICTING PERTINENT CURRICULUM HICCUPS CONSTRAINING STUDENTS PURSUING SENIOR NATIONAL CERTIFICATE: SOUTH AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

The primary objective of schooling is to ensure that all learners succeed and complete their grades. This goal can only be achieved when all the role players are prepared, and all the conditions and opportunities are created for teaching and learning to take place. Despite these conditions, there are challenges which contribute towards poor learner performance. The objective of this paper was to identify and characterize the pertinent factors which contribute to poor grade 12 learner performance in Limpopo Province, South Africa. In investigating this phenomenon, the researchers deployed interpretative research paradigm. Semi-structured interviews were administered to six secondary school principals to gain rich data. Findings demonstrate there are several varied pertinent challenges which account to poor grade 2 learner performance in Vhembe Education District, Limpopo, including absenteeism and health related matters, inadequate advocating learners code of conduct, poor socio-economic conditions, and volatility of the schooling environment due to school violence and gangsterism. This study is of great significance as it strengthens epistemic understanding on learner performance in secondary schools.

Keywords: National Senior Certificate, grade twelve learners, learner performance, curriculum challenges, curriculum enrichment

Introduction

The success of every education system is measured by the performance of the students in grade 12 which is the exit standard grade in the South African context. This is also termed the National Senior Certificate. As a result of that, the annual publication of this National Senior Certificate (NSC) results attracts the public interest and it puts school leadership (the school management team) namely, principals, deputy principals and departmental heads under undue pressure. Other role players who have interest in the learner performance include learners themselves, their parents, and the politicians. There have been instances where principals have to be removed from schools which demonstrate consistent underperformance. Learners who pass the National Senior certificate have access to proceed with post schooling in different institutions of higher learning.

The responsible department which offers the National Senior Certificate is the Department of Basic Education. Literature indicates that the performance of grade12 has been a concern for a prolonged time as compared to other provinces (Department of Basic Education, 2011). The purpose of this study is to examine the pertinent factors which impede Grade 12 learner performance in one of the Education districts in Limpopo, South Africa. This study is subdivided into a number of subsections, the next section will focus on the diagnostic reflection of the nature of Limpopo Provincial grade12 learner performance. The next sub-section explores the challenges maintains that poor learner performance in Grade 12 National Senior Certificate has been a cause for concern in South Africa and, in particular, in Limpopo Province for several years. The Grade 12 performance in Limpopo Province has not been satisfactory for some time and Vhembe Education District, in particular, faces challenges on many fronts. In this research, the problem that is identified for investigation is the poor performance of learners in the Grade 12 National Senior Certificate examinations in the Vhembe Education District. Many factors account for this problem and the purpose of this study was to

The diagnostic reflection of nature of the Limpopo Provincial grade 12 learner performance

Every year, a detailed report of the performance of each province is made available on the website of the Department of Basic Education. This report is detailed and contains a lot of statistics for interpretation. This report contain data on both performance and underperformance of schools regarding grade 12. The metric system used is comprehensive and detailed. It covers the national, provincial and district performances. The Department of Basic Education (2021) showed that the performance in Grade 12 was 72.5% in 2016, 75.1% in 2017, 78.2% in 2018, 81.3% in 2019 and 76.2 in 2020. The Limpopo Department of Basic Education for the past five years had performed below the national overall pass percentage. The pass rate achieved in 2020 by Basic Education (DBE) (2020) indicates that Limpopo Province achieved a pass rate of 68.2% in 2020, 73.2% in 2019, 70.6% in 2018, 67.4% in 2017 and 62.5% in 2016 in the National Senior Certificate. While the results appeared to have improved from the 62.5% pass rate in 2016, only 26.8% qualified for entrance to a bachelor's degree in 2019. The National Senior Certificate overall results declined from 73.2% in 2019 to 68.2% in 2020. The quality of passes improved in that 29.1% of learners received bachelor's Degree passes and 23.6% received Diploma passes in 2020.

Department of Basic Education (2021) reflected the performance of Vhembe Education District in Limpopo (which is the area of this research) in the past five years. The district achieved the pass rate of 77.1% in 2020, 81.5% in 2019, 80.1% in 2018, 78.4% in 2017 and 70.3% in 2016. The results of Vhembe Education District are comparable with the Limpopo Department of Education (LDoE) Grade 12 NSC performance. When the district declined in its performance, the province also declined. In 2019, LDoE had an achievement of 73.2% to 68.2% in 2020 and Vhembe Education District achieved 81.5% in 2019 and declined to 77.1% in 2020. The analysis reflected above showed that the performance of Vhembe Education District influenced the performance of the LDoE.

Scholarly studies on related perceived impediments of poor performance

Heystek (2015) states that the greatest challenge of the South African principals is to improve the academic results in state schools. Naidoo (2019) asserts that the improvement of learning outcomes is the key role of the principal and School Management Teams are compelled to engage stakeholders. This is further emphasised in the South African School Act of 1996 which states that the principal accounts to the DBE for the academic results of their schools. In the same Act, the principals of underperforming schools are expected to compile a school academic improvement plan and submit it to the DBE. The researchers having read varied scholarly work, identified and categorized the challenges related to learner performance in curriculum, family, and behavioural challenges, and quality of assessment tasks.

Curriculum challenges

In South Africa, the curriculum has undergone several radical changes since 1998, the last revision being the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) which was introduced in 2012 (Ntshangase, & Mabusela (2023). Umalusi (2017) describes CAPS as a single, comprehensive and concise policy document which replaced the Subject and Learning Programme guidelines and Subject Assessment Guidelines for all subjects listed in the National Curriculum Statement of 2009. Ngema (2016) posits that curriculum change may lead to confusion among teachers and learners. The changes might bring fear to teachers on how they are going to handle new content brought into the new curriculum. Blignaut (2017) emphasizes that curriculum change is a very complex and is characterized by challenges from various stakeholders. Scholtz (2013) points to one of the factors that cause curriculum challenges as a lack of capacity building for educators on curriculum related matters by SMTs and curriculum advisors. Alami (2016) notes that the challenge of the content gap of some educators could lead to poor teaching methods and the use of improper evaluation instruments for the grades. Further, the scholar indicates that the other contributing factor that lead to poor learner performance is the poor subject content knowledge of teachers. Some teachers have a shallow knowledge of the subject they are offering and are unable to teach in the way that can make learners gain knowledge of the subject.

Mbugua, Kibet, Muthua and Nkonke (2012) highlight factors like insufficient learner teaching support materials and equipment, poor management of teaching time and substandard assessment tasks. Learners also underperform because of poor curriculum coverage and high teacher absenteeism (Finlayson, 2009). The principal should be involved in actual teaching and learning to have the experience of what is happening in the classroom. Maemeko, Nkengbeza and Ntabi (2017) maintain that curriculum challenges could be a weakness of the curriculum design, lack of qualified teachers to teach new subjects or content, lack of learning motivation from learners and negative attitudes of teachers because they lack skills to manage changes in content that would require new lesson plans and new teaching methods and approaches. According to Masino and Nino-Zarazua (2016), there are benefits brought by the new curriculum, such as an increase in productivity, economic growth and development. It also can expose teachers and learners to new teaching materials that can be easily interpreted by the teachers to improve learner performance.

Family and behavioural challenges

Rammala (2009) argues that family background could contribute to poor performance of learners. Parents with no educational background are unable to assist their children with homework and projects because some of them cannot read and write. Ngema (2016) cites the impact of the home environment on learner performance because children receive their first education and socialisation at home. Learners from poor families might lack cognitive competence because they did not receive early education which can lead to poor mastery of vocabulary and a lack of social skills. Mbugua et al. (2012) assert that parents or guardians without educational background may not be good role models for their children. Yator (2003) is of the view that there is a significant relationship between the learner's performance and their socioeconomic background. The socioeconomic background has the potential to influence self-esteem, aspirations and motivation of the learner. Behavioural challenges could be the result of factors as determined by Alami (2016), like the absence of the parents for various reasons such as parental death or divorce where one parent is no longer available to offer support.

The quality of the assessment tasks

Alami (2016) argues that the prominent factors that contribute to learner underperformance are improper evaluation instruments and the gap between materials used for teaching and the students' needs. The designers of the assessment instruments are not considering the socioeconomic background of the learners. Learners from rural areas might find questions related to cities very difficult to answer because they are not exposed to urban life. The quality of assessment tasks determines the quality of learning outcomes. The departmental heads moderate the tasks to ensure that they cover the knowledge, skills, values and attitudes that need to be acquired by learners.

Harb and El (2006) allude to the factor that when learners miss classes, they will not be fully prepared for the assessment tasks. The challenge is that when learners miss out in some topics and the other factor is presented by the use of English as the language of teaching and learning in South Africa. The assessment tasks are set in English and some learners fail to interpret the questions. Sinyosi (2015) argues that some of the factors might be caused by lack of teacher support by school management teams, which stems from poor organisation of supervisory roles expected from school leadership.

Strategic interventions for enhancing performance in schools.

The following strategies are suggested by different scholars:

Curriculum enrichment

Wiggins, Harding and Engelbrecht (2017) defines curriculum enrichment as a way of nurturing academically gifted learners to keep them enthusiastic and help them to discover their potential. Curriculum enrichment also focuses on weak learners or learners at risk of failing to assist them to close the gaps. Successful curriculum enrichment programmes can improve learners' performance. Wenglinsky (2001) believes that the key to improving learner performance lies in improving schools' academic standards. The school's curriculum and assessment should be aligned to the set standards. When the teachers can meet the set minimum standards, this translates into improved learning outcomes. The teachers should be monitored and supported to ensure that their classroom practices meet the set standards of the schools.

Training workshops for teachers

Umalusi (2017) and Bessong and Ogina (2022) argue that regular training, seminars and workshops should be organised for teachers in order to update their knowledge of the subjects they are offering. Teachers should also be trained on the implementation of continuous assessment to assist in achieving learning objectives. Darling-Hammond, Hylar and Gardner (2017) regard teacher training as professional development. It is structured professional learning that results in changes in teacher knowledge and practices which could lead to the improvement of learning outcomes in all grades. Jones (2005) emphasize that teachers need training and support to enable them to make valuable assessment decisions. Teachers also need to know how to provide quality feedback to learners and be able to teach learners to receive feedback positively. Ganyaupfu (2013) views poor learner performance as fundamentally linked to the use of ineffective teaching methods by teachers to impact knowledge and skills of learners. The quality of teaching is mostly measured by the performance of the learners. For teaching to be effective, teachers need to be trained on how to use different teaching strategies to assist learner with different abilities and talents.

Collaboration with other schools

Preston and Barnes (2017) view that collaborative leadership as enhancing teamwork and motivation amongst the staff. When the school promotes collaboration, the staff learn to work together, and it improves job knowledge. Learner performance becomes the responsibility of all the teachers in the school. The schools need to be trained on the involvement of the stakeholders in matters of learner performance. Collaboration with

stakeholders is emphasised in the National Development Plan, vision 2030. Stakeholders should support schools to achieve quality learning outcomes that would meet the community needs and improve the economy of South Africa. According to Pont, Nusche and Moorman (2008), collaboration in some schools is a new leadership concept for school management. The school leadership needs to develop their skills to become involved in issues that are beyond the confinements of their own schools. Mattatall and Power (2014) defines collaboration as a systematic process in which people work together to analyse and impact professional practice to improve individual or collective results. Teacher collaboration can be explained as a means to improve both teachers' instructional practice and learner performance. Teacher collaboration is a process where teachers meet to share, refine and assess the impact of the intervention strategies and approaches or the methods they are using in the class.

Poulos, Culbertson and Piazza (2016) indicate that the benefits of effective teacher collaboration is associated with strong learner performance because teachers of different abilities draw from working together to solve curriculum problems. Graham (2007) identified alternative ways of collaboration such as study groups, professional networks and mentoring relationships. Teachers in their different groups are able to develop knowledge and skills that help them create common assessments, identify their own weaknesses and strengths and help each other to improve on their weakness.

Instructional leadership as theory underpinning the study.

Instructional leadership focuses on learner-centred leadership and leadership for learning Hallinger (2015); Mpsisane (2015); Manaseh (2016); Ovando and Cavazos (2004); Leepo (2015); Tigere (2016); Alig-Mielcarek (2003). According to Mestry (2017) and Leithwood, Louis, Anderson and Wahlstrom (2004); Day and Sammons (2016) instructional leadership as involving the actions that school principals take in order to promote learners' performance. The action of the instructional leader demands the practice of planning, coordination and improvement of teaching and learning. The principal should take actions based on the plans that would motivate both the learners and educators to show excellence in their schoolwork. Heaven and Bourne (2016) argues that instructional leader analyses the pattern of performance of learners in a grade and compares it with the quality of the teaching offered by the educators. The analysis of results could assist to point out where the problem is with the learner or the teacher and the relevant remedial action that would be taken. Bendikson and Hattle (2012) are of the view that instructional leadership has a stronger influence on learner performance than other leadership styles. When the school leadership is focused on teaching and learning of learners, the school is likely to be effective which will impact positively on the performance of the learners. To Smith (2015), instructional leadership focuses on the importance of professional development for teachers. The teachers who are developed on curriculum matters are able to manage learning activities in a classroom better than less developed teachers.

Research design and methodology

Approach and paradigm

In the quest to embark on this research journey, the authors deployed qualitative research approach. The study approach was largely anchored on the following aspects of research paradigm namely, the ontological, epistemological, methodological stands (Scotland, 2012). The ontological approach was influenced by multiple realities participants demonstrated in the understanding of the phenomenon under investigation, namely the pertinent impediments affecting learner performance in grade 12. The epistemological stance was based on the rationale that the comprehension of knowledge is subjective and depends on the realities of the knower and how knowledge is interpreted by individuals (Yin,2003). Qualitative studies are helpful when the researcher wants to understand a human phenomenon (Neuman, 2006; Nieuwenhuy, 2009).

Study focus area, sample selection, instrumentation, and procedure

The study was conducted in the Vhembe education district, situated in Limpopo Province in South Africa. This is mainly rural area. We purposively identified six secondary schools and 6 principals to provide us with rich and reliable data. Our approach was influenced by the views of Welman, Kruger and Mitchell (2005) when they argue that not only is study impacted by methodology and instrumentation, but by the suitability and appropriateness of the sampling procedure and participants. Qualifications for selection was that all participants should have 5 years unbroken service in the department and having been in the same school for 5 years. The sample was coded to ensure that we comply with ethical protocols (P1, P2, P3, P4, P5 and P6). The sample also constituted both males and females. The interviews took the form of semi-structured procedure.

Data analysis

Data analysis is intensive and requires a competency. This process is a long and tedious one and we followed the processes of Marshall and Rossman (2005) and Paton (2016) wherein we discovered patterns, categories and then developed themes. We used the thematic data analysis method to derive the themes. The processes entailed backward and forward engagement with transcribed data. Our research positionality never influenced data processing and data was presented verbatim and participants were coded to protect their identities. This research was interpretive and descriptive in approach and there was no intention to generalize the results.

Ethical protocol and credibility

Before the study was conducted, the researchers applied for the approval to conduct the study from the college ethics committee. After we were given approval, permission was sought from the education department authorities to enter their fields to interview relevant participants. To ensure that the study is credible, we followed the strategies of Guba and Lincoln (1994), namely prolonged engagement, thick description, dependability, and confirmability. The authors also made meaning by ensuring that the findings are comparable with literature and personal reflection.

Research findings, analysis and discussion

In this section, we discuss in detail the emerging themes from data analysis. The views and perceptions of the interviewees are cited verbatim to enhance credibility of the study. This study was intended to identify and characterize the factors which impede learner performance in grade 12. The four themes namely, absenteeism and health related issues, the absence of advocating of learners' code of conduct, the volatile school terrain due to violence and gangsterism and poor-socio-economic family backgrounds can be broadly categorized into those outside the school and intra school/community related.

Absenteeism and health related issues

During data collection, participants felt that among the varied reasons which account to poor performance in grade 12 is absenteeism which is as a result of health-related matters. The participants cited chronic illness as one of the matters which create problems of attendance. P2, lamented the cause of sickness:

"I have learners who are suffer from chronic illness, I am not at liberty to disclose, in my class. The learners lose period because sometimes they need to go and collect their medication, or they are absent because they are sick. As a school we have good relationship with the nearest clinic and hospital in terms of supporting the learners. The nurses and social workers have a support schedule to visit our school to offer counselling and give health talks to the learners. The support visits seem to be helpful to learners because absenteeism is minimised. Learners understand what they are going through, and they are taught coping skills."

On a similar note, P1 did allude to the fact that absenteeism created by ill health does have ramifications on the performance of learners. However, the participant did not disclose the illness learners suffer from:

"When we request attendance reports from grade 12 responsible teachers, we are confronted with high amount of absenteeism. Remember this analysis is vital for us because it provides a picture and diagnosis of why we are at this point in terms of performance which we supply to education authorities".

Bialobrzaska, Randel, Hellmann and Winker (2012) in their study found that challenges of illness such as HIV/AIDS and others do have serious implications on student performance. The challenge is worsened by the fact that during examination period, these learners do not sit for the examination and have to register again and makes a dent in the National Senior certificate. Flowing from the views of the participants above, it is important that school leadership and education authority's device means on assisting learners who miss classes due to circumstances beyond their control. This will assist regarding the improvement of their performance and making sure that their futures are not compromised due to such.

Strengthening and advocating code of conduct

Crafting policy or code of conduct is not enough but it is fundamental that the crafters start to conduct rigorous advocacy to ensure that the code reaches its intended recipients. During data analysis, we found that ill behaviour and disruptions during lessons accounts heavily also on poor performance. Upon deeper analysis, we found that lack of advocacy of policy is the cause of such.

One of the participants, P3 retorted:

"We have learners' code of conduct which could be used to deal with issues of high rate of learner ill-discipline. The point is that if the code of conduct is used and all stakeholders know about and as a principal I enforce. The behaviour of learners could change and we have discipline in the school. Effective teaching and learning could take place and it would translate to improved learning outcome. Where the code is lacking, we just need to beef it up and that's it."

In supporting the assertion of P3, P5 was of this view:

"Our failure is when it comes to implementation of what we have, such as the code of conduct for learners. The department have guidelines and we should after developing such just shoot. You see, former model C schools' beta us on this one, during registration and the start of the academic year, parents and learners are gathered for policy advocacy, they are taken though code of conduct, financial policy, and dress code, how to keep your hair, ear rings matters. With us, nothing happens, we fail to invoke to code during mishap. Further, we have to analyze the challenges and then review where there are loopholes. But you see the type of governance structure we have do not assist".

The role of the principal is critical in defending and protecting the academic agenda. This could be done by adequate planning and implementation of policy which guards and guides the curriculum activities of the school. This view bodes well with what Mestry (2017), Leithwood et al. (2004) and Day and Sammons (2016) in their understanding of instructional leadership when they assert that it involves the actions that school principals take in order to promote learners' performance such as the practice of planning, coordination and improvement of teaching and learning. The principal should take actions based on the plans that would motivate both the learners and educators to show excellence in their schoolwork.

Volatile school terrain due to violence and gangsterism

Safety in schools should be priority number one and serve as the bedrock of any educational environment for both teachers and learners. Participants were vocal on this one and their perceptions are captured below as follows:

P2 views:

"This school is challenged by gangsters in the township. Learners belong to different gangs and they fight due to their differences. Some of the learners bring dangerous weapons to protect themselves. Learners live in fear, and it affects them psychologically and the performance in the classroom is affected."

P6 briefly asserted that:

"Some learners terrorize the schooling community, and this kills the morale of role players. At the end of the day....., it has negative effect on the future of learners, You cannot concentrate when you are bullied, violence is meted on your life and so on. The authority has to increase their efforts on this one". Lats year we had a serious incident in which some of the learners fought each other and upon investigation, we found out that the started from the community and it spilled over to ethe school".

Poor socio-economic family backgrounds

The economic and social standing of the parents or the guardians of learners is critical. During data collection process, participants indicated that the community in which their schools are based are very poor and from rural area. P4 opined".

"We have learners who demonstrate the potential to go very far in education but the unfortunate thing is that they come from very very poor families. To say poor is underscoring, but they are peasants. You know hunger can still be potential from you".

P1 was of this view:

"This poverty thing is affecting us because you cannot watch pupils with greatness going to waist. Some of these learners just drop out because of poverty. It is a monster that is ravaging the society. But we are also not watching without doing anything. You have to keep motivating, that one day it will be fine and do not allow the poverty situation to rob you of your destiny".

P6 in aligning with these perceptions added his voice:

"I have gifted learners coming from struggling families. I buy study guides and some of the supplementary materials for my learners. Some of the teachers also donate study materials and our learners appreciate the support. We have produced several learners who produced distinctions from poorer backgrounds."

Mlowosa, Kalimangasi and Mathias (2014) pointed to poor family background and learners with special needs. Learners from poor backgrounds lack financial support to get private tutors and buy supplementary materials. Some of the learners depend on social grant for financial support. The home environment in poorer communities

is not educationally supportive due to factors like poverty, illiterate parents, emotional problems, and other socioeconomic challenges. Dikgale (2012:20) postulates that financial problems lead to some of the parents to be less involved in the education of their children. Some of the parents are unable to pay for the extra lessons that are used as an intervention strategy to improve the results of the school. The schools have differentiated support programmes for learners from poor background and learners with special needs to cope with the demand of schoolwork. The school leadership should create support system that would be able to embrace all learners and promote a culture of effective teaching and learning in the school. Learners should be empowered regardless of background to create a better future for themselves and their families.

Conclusion

Grade12 is a critical stage not only for secondary school learners, but also the parents, the education authorities, and institutions of higher learning. The results are vital for learners because from passing grade 12, they have an opportunity to continue with higher education. This research was intended to establish and characterize the factors impeding learner performance in grade 12. The discussions touched on a number of critical and relevant areas which include empirical studies on perceived impediments of poor performance. Also, the diagnostic reflection of the nature of the Limpopo grade 12 learners' performance was explored. This paper further interrogated strategic interventions for improving performance. In investigating the phenomenon of learner performance, the researchers deployed qualitative interpretative research approach. During data collection, four themes emerged which are absenteeism and health related issues, absence of advocating and strengthening the code of conduct, volatile school terrain due to violence and gangsterism and poor socio-economic family background.

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