

Evidence and Stakeholder Analysis of Education Policy: Progression School Policy in South Africa

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Abstract:- This paper aims to investigate the evidence and stakeholder analysis related to the progression policy within South Africa's school education framework. It begins with an overview of the policy, followed by a discussion of other relevant educational policy documents that provide a historical context for its development. The evolution of school education policies in South Africa is traced from the colonial era to the post-colonial period. Subsequently, a political evidence-based analysis is conducted, framing the policy's objectives around issues of redress and transformation. The discussion then shifts to a stakeholder analysis utilizing an appropriate framework. It is posited that while the progression policy's goals are well-intentioned and justifiable, the entrenched inequalities within South African schools complicate its potential for success, highlighting the necessity for thorough policy examination. Finally, alternative policy options are explored, including models drawn from the Chinese vocational education system.

Keywords:- Progression Policy, Redress, Colonial, Post-Colonial, Transformation.

I. INTRODUCTION

Education is fundamental to societal advancement, influencing both individual opportunities and collective progress. In South Africa, educational policy significantly impacts students' academic journeys, with the progression policy being one central focus. This policy stipulates that students should not remain in a single grade for more than four years, aiming to cater to diverse learner needs while enhancing overall educational results. However, the intricate nature of these policies often incites discussions among various stakeholders including educators, parents, teachers' unions, and policymakers all of whom have a vested interest in student outcomes. This paper thoroughly examines the evidence surrounding the grade retention and progression policies in South African schools. By analyzing the perspectives of different stakeholders and their influence on the policy's implementation, this study seeks to clarify the implications of this educational policy for society and its importance in the wider educational landscape.

II. A SUMMARY OF THE POLICY AND A BRIEF BACKGROUND OF HOW IT CAME ABOUT

The Department of Basic Education (DBE) in South Africa first introduced the grade progression policy in 1998, with full implementation commencing in 2015 (DBE, 2015). This policy delineates the criteria for student retention, promotion, and progression to subsequent grades based on specific requirements. Promotion occurs when a student meets the minimum achievement levels for each subject, alongside adhering to the promotion criteria set in the National policy pertaining to the programme and promotion requirements (NPPPR) of the National Curriculum Statement (NCS) for Grades R-12. Progression allows a student to advance to the next grade, excluding Grade R, despite not fulfilling all promotion requirements, provided that any previous underperformance is addressed in the new grade (Admission policy for ordinary public schools, Government Notice 2434, Government Gazette, vol. 400, No. 19377, 19 October 1998).

To contextualize the emergence of this policy, the political dynamics of policymaking are examined, drawing on Christie's (2021:51) analysis of three significant eras in South African school policymaking: the settler colonialism period, the apartheid years characterized by increased educational inequalities, and the post-1994 era marked by transformative policy changes aimed at redress. The redress agenda, rooted in the historical injustices of the South African education system, provides a rationale for why policymakers deemed this policy necessary for addressing past disparities. The early educational landscape in South Africa was defined by ethnic divisions, with public education primarily available to a small white minority, while the majority of indigenous Africans were excluded. The apartheid era exacerbated these inequalities by segregating educational resources among racially classified groups, thereby intensifying disparities.

The post-apartheid period introduced policies founded on principles of justice, equity, and non-discrimination, with the progression policy emerging as a notable example. This policy aligns with section 29 of the Constitution and the South African Schools Act (SASA) of 1996, which was pivotal in catalyzing significant changes within the educational framework, despite certain limitations. One key limitation is that the governance and funding arrangements established by SASA have inadvertently perpetuated the existing inequalities

between the two educational sub-systems in South Africa. Christie (2021:69) argues that these governance and funding structures have created a market-driven education system where affluent middle-class groups continue to receive superior educational opportunities compared to poorer communities. This paper concurs with this viewpoint, asserting that without policy reforms, these arrangements are likely to further entrench educational inequalities. Regarding the progression policy, it is suggested that both retention and automatic promotion carry economic ramifications that cannot be resolved solely through the policy's provisions, underscoring the need for alternative policy strategies.

III. EVIDENCE ANALYSIS

The primary objective of evidence-informed policy is to enhance the reliability of recommendations concerning the effectiveness and efficiency of policy frameworks and alternatives from involved stakeholders (Parkhurst, 2017:122). This is crucial for policymakers seeking to understand what strategies yield positive outcomes under specific conditions, as well as for government officials focused on improving data and analytical techniques for policy evaluation. Regardless of the methodologies employed, evidence-informed policy necessitates robust data, analytical capabilities, and, fundamentally, political backing (Head, 2010:13). This segment of the paper addresses evidence derived from the political context surrounding the aims of the progression

policy. The core issue that this policy seeks to tackle is framed within the stipulation at the conclusion of the progression policy statement regarding the need to “address the underperformance of the learner in the next grade.” It is argued that addressing this issue requires support, which in turn necessitates adequate resources. Unfortunately, many schools, particularly in township and rural areas, remain under-resourced, leading to calls for alternative policy directions supported by the public's beliefs, values, and missions (Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation (DPME) 2014).

Furthermore, the progression policy aims to minimize retention, thereby promoting a higher number of learners, especially in quintile 1 schools that historically receive low funding (Refer to figure 1 below). The policy aligns with a broader agenda focused on poverty alleviation, employment creation, and addressing inequality, as championed by the leading party in the newly formed government of national unity (GNU), the African National Congress (ANC). The ANC's priority has been to alter the power dynamics rooted in colonialism and apartheid within the educational system, advocating for justice, equity, and non-discrimination (Chisholm, 2004, cited in Christie, 2021:4). The legacy of colonialism and apartheid distorted funding structures, favouring the minority of the white population, and necessitated policies that address these historical injustices within the education sector.

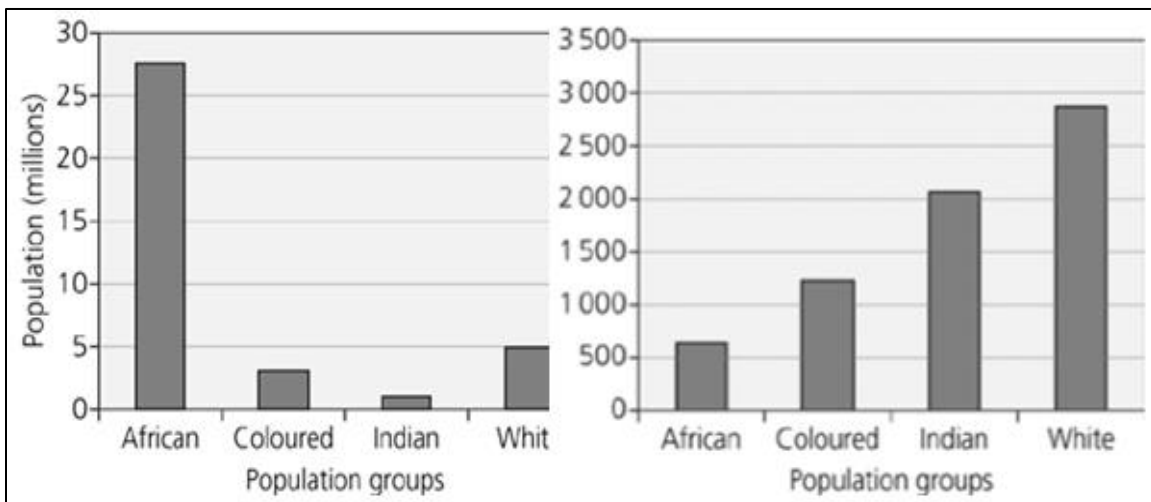


Fig 1: Historically Distorted School Education Expenditure Across Different Population Groups, as Recorded in 1989*
 Source: Postcolonial Directions in Education (2021)

To further illustrate the complexity of achieving the policy's objectives, Jansen and Sayed (2001:13) contend that redress policies like the progression policy often overlook the lessons from the 1970s school protests, which not only catalyzed the end of racial segregation but also left enduring consequences that resulted in two racially distinct school educational sub-systems. One such sub-system comprises the predominantly black township schools, characterized by low

productivity and performance outcomes, while the other consists of a smaller, primarily white middle-class component that continues to perform relatively well. These disparities are reflected in international assessments, with South African learners frequently ranking among the poorest performers in competitions such as the Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SAQMEQ), Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study

(TIMSS), and the Progress in International Reading and Literacy Study (PIRLS). Christie (2021:72) also highlights the stark differences in performance patterns among learners in various schools, noting that 80% of learners attend poorly functioning schools, mostly black township institutions, while a mere 8% are in fee-paying schools that achieve favorable results. The evidence presented indicates that the historically embedded power dynamics within the South African educational system hinder the progression policy's ability to fulfill its objectives, reinforcing the need for alternative policy approaches.

IV. STAKEHOLDER ANALYSIS

Varvasovszky and Brugha (2000:338) define stakeholder analysis as a method for acquiring insights into the interests, behaviors, and interrelations of individuals and organizations involved in a decision-making or implementation process. This section of the paper identifies a stakeholder analysis framework and applies it to discern the stakeholders involved in the progression policy's implementation. Stakeholders play critical roles in both the formulation and execution of policies. Ideally, they should contribute to policy development to inform its direction effectively. Additionally, their engagement is vital during the implementation phase, which is cyclical in nature. It is important to recognize that many other stakeholders (both internal and external) exist within the educational system, and those identified here are not the only participants in the policymaking process.

The analysis identifies four primary stakeholders at the forefront of implementing the progression policy in schools: parents, learners, teachers' unions, and teaching and non-teaching staff. Brugha and Varvasovszky (2000:243) emphasize the significance of power dynamics among stakeholders, which vary across different forms of stakeholder analysis. The roles of these stakeholders range from low to high power and interest regarding the progression policy. In alignment with Jansen and Sayed's (2001) identification of two educational sub-systems, the stakeholder analysis framework is separately delineated for each sub-system, categorized into four quadrants as follows:
 Quadrant 1: Low power and Low interest.
 Quadrant 2: Low power and High interest.
 Quadrant 3: High power and Low Interest.
 Quadrant 4: High power and high interest.

Christie (2021:54) asserts that education policies like the progression policy are crafted by those with the authority to allocate values, influenced by power and interest relations as well as contextual factors. It is important to note that the following observations stem from twenty years of experience as a science teacher in three different quintile schools in South Africa, with insights drawn from ethnographic observations made eight years ago. Stakeholder dynamics can evolve over time, necessitating caution in interpreting past observations. Figures 2 and 3 below illustrate the involvement of the identified stakeholders, namely; teachers, learners, parents, and teachers' unions in the implementation of the progression policy within both white suburban and black township schools.

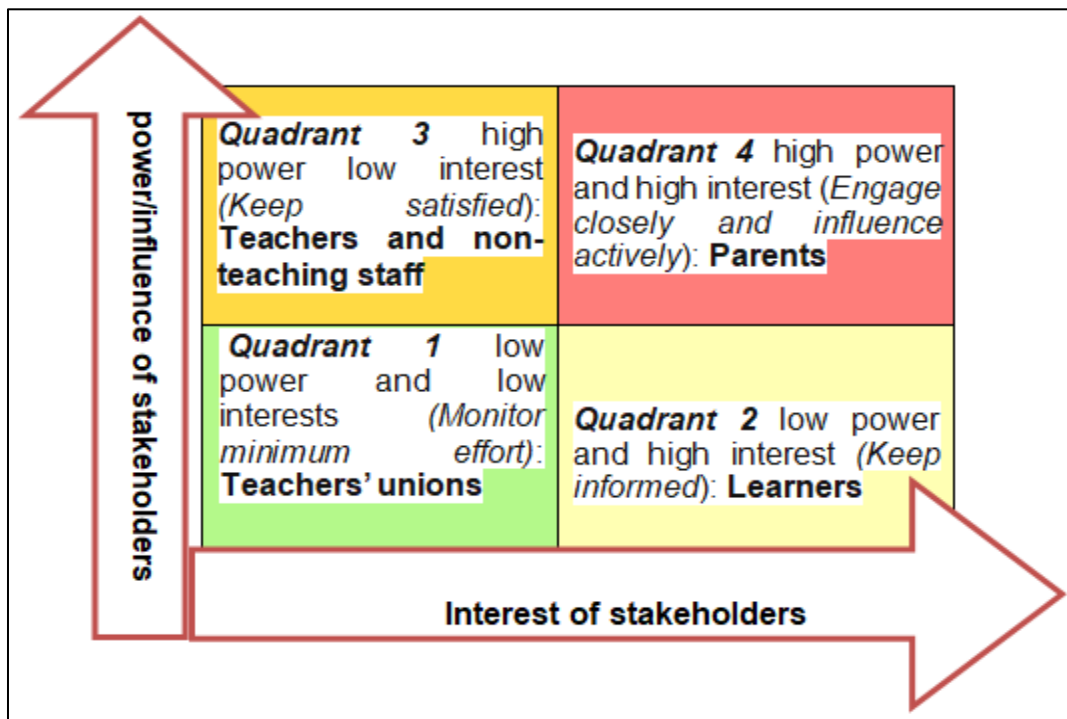


Fig. 2: Stakeholder Analysis Framework Applicable to White Suburban Schools
 Source: Grid Template Derived from www.stakeholdermap.com

From the stakeholder analysis matrix above, it is evident that parents within the white elite schools wield significant power and influence over the implementation of the progression policy compared to other stakeholders. Conversely, teachers’ unions exhibit low power and influence in this context. Based on Jansen and Sayed’s (2001) assertion that white elite school sub-systems demonstrate superior productivity and performance, the observations suggest that

parent involvement may contribute to this advantage. In terms of the progression policy, whether students are retained or promoted as per the policy’s guidelines, the elite schools, benefiting from superior resources and historical funding advantages, are likely to gain more from this policy than their black school counterparts. This disparity signifies a pressing need for alternative policy directions.

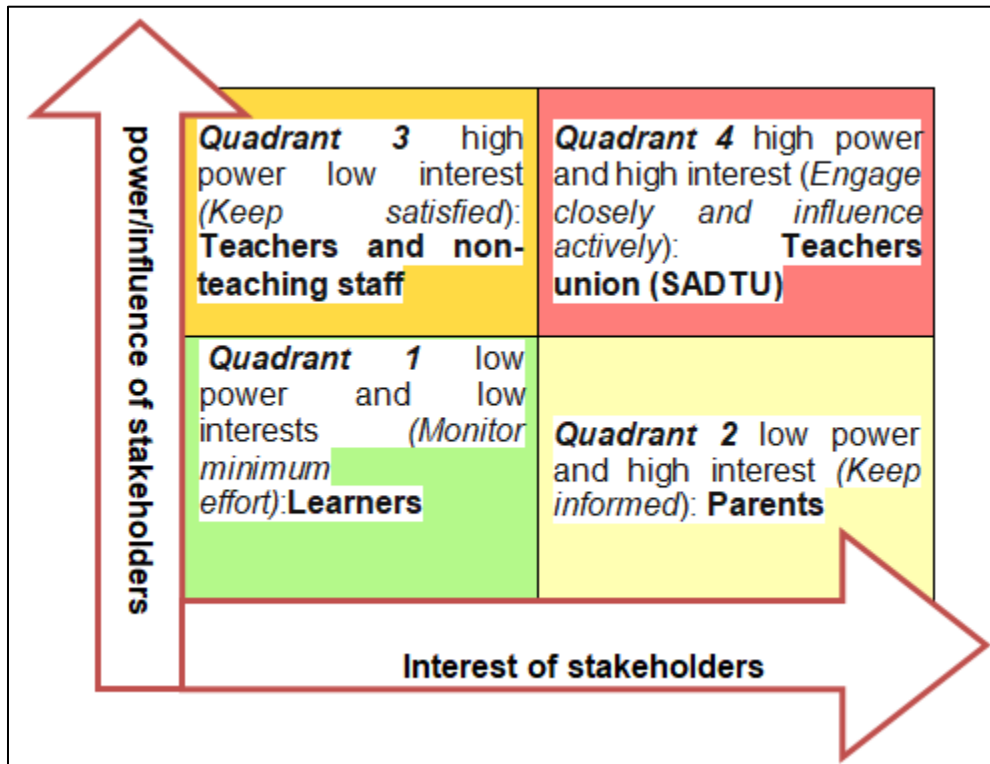


Fig. 3: Stakeholder Analysis Framework Applicable to Township Schools
 Source: Grid Template Derived from: www.stakeholdermap.com

According to the stakeholder analysis grid for township schools above, the South African Democratic Teachers Union (SADTU) holds considerable power and influence over the implementation of the progression policy, surpassing that of other stakeholders. This finding indicates SADTU's significant sway in shaping educational policy within black and township schools. As a prominent teachers' union aligned with the ANC, SADTU supports the progression policy, which reflects its commitment to redress and transformation. However, it is concerning that the policy has not produced the intended outcomes of redress, as many black learners exiting township schools struggle to find employment or pursue further education. This complexity underscores the necessity for alternative policy strategies to address these challenges.

V. RECOMMENDATIONS: ALTERNATIVE POLICY DIRECTIONS

Mainardes (1999:6) argues that grade retention practices encompass various interconnected dimensions, including economic, pedagogical, psychological, political, and social factors. Economically, grade retention is costly and represents inefficiencies on both micro and macro levels (i.e., for governments and families), as students repeating a grade occupy spaces that could be utilized by others. Additionally, Mainardes (1999:15) notes that promotion policies can have unintended negative consequences, sometimes serving as part of a social inclusion agenda that garners broad political support.

The complexities surrounding retention versus promotion in South African schools necessitate the exploration of four alternative policy directions. First, differentiated policies tailored to the diverse conditions across schools are essential, rather than a one-size-fits-all approach as advocated by the current progression policy. Second, policies should be developed based on the existing realities of different educational sub-systems. Third, a review of language policies is crucial to ensure all learners have equal access to education in their home language (Christie, 2021:12-13). Fourth, a shift towards policy options that emphasize technical and vocational skill development, rather than solely focusing on retention or automatic promotion, is recommended. One potential model is the Chinese National Vocational Education Reform policy of 2019, which aims to expand enrolment in higher vocational colleges to address the shortage of skilled personnel. This policy also seeks to increase opportunities for vocational education, categorizing it into secondary and higher vocational levels.

When considering models of effective policy implementation, it is vital to recognize the stark differences between the socio-economic and political contexts of China and South Africa. For instance, China's economy is substantially more robust than that of South Africa, which operates as a democratic state where citizen engagement in the policymaking process is encouraged, in contrast to China's totalitarian governance. Thus, while South Africa may draw upon China's vocational education policies for insights, it should adapt these lessons to fit its unique circumstances and needs, rather than directly replicating them.

VI. CONCLUSION

As demonstrated by the analysis of progression school policy in South Africa, educational policies often function within a politically charged environment. However, it is essential to acknowledge that politicians do not create policies solely to change educational practices; rather, these policies reflect a search for legitimacy, which often depends on the evidence and stakeholders involved. This paper argues that policymakers should refrain from crafting idealized policies that merely serve political agendas. Instead, they should prioritize evidence-based approaches and actively engage citizens as stakeholders in the policymaking process. In the context of South African education, particularly regarding the contentious issues of retention and automatic promotion inherent in the progression policy, the initial step should involve addressing inequalities related to class, race, culture, and language, especially from the perspective of the most disadvantaged schools located in townships and rural areas.

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