

# Grade Repetition, School Drop-Out and Ineffective School Policy

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## Abstract

This study examines the prevalence of underperformance, grade repetition, and drop-out rates in selected underperforming schools within the Amathole West District, Eastern Cape Province. The investigation covered a five-year period and consistently revealed high failure rates in the targeted schools. Key informants, including teachers and principals, identified the Promotion and Progression Policy as a contributing factor to these failure rates. A primary criticism is that the responsibility for helping learners catch up falls disproportionately on teachers, while students themselves exert minimal effort. Moreover, the study highlights that, in addition to the promotion policy and inadequate resources, both in-school and out-of-school factors affect academic performance. Among these factors, weak and inconsistent leadership has led to fluctuating pass rates over the years.

**Keywords:** : Underperformance, Promotion and Progression Policy, Amathole West District, Eastern Cape, academic performance



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## Introduction

Underperformance, grade repetition, and school drop-out rates continue to plague historically and economically disadvantaged schools in democratic South Africa, particularly in regions still grappling with the legacy of apartheid-era inequities<sup>1</sup>. This paper seeks to investigate the multifaceted factors contributing to underperformance, as reflected in grade repetition and school drop-out rates, in a sample of underperforming schools located in the Amathole West District, Eastern Cape Province. As one of the poorest provinces in the country, the district suffers from systemic challenges such as pervasive poverty, inadequate service delivery, high unemployment, and limited economic development<sup>2</sup>. These socio-economic factors, combined with institutional weaknesses, form the backdrop against which this study examines the

<sup>1</sup> Mncedisi Christian Maphalala and Nontobeko Prudence Khumalo, "Curriculum Management in KZN Rural High Schools," *Advances in Educational Marketing, Administration, and Leadership* (IGI Global, 2021), <http://dx.doi.org/10.4018/978-1-7998-7168-2.ch001>.

<sup>2</sup> Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs, 2020

intersection of educational policy and academic outcomes. A particular focus is placed on the Promotion and Progression Policy, implemented in the Further Education and Training (FET) Phase in 2013, which has sparked considerable debate among educators, policymakers, and scholars due to its perceived role in perpetuating underperformance.

At the advent of democratic rule in 1994, South Africa's education system was envisioned as a vehicle for dismantling intergenerational inequalities and enabling upward social mobility for historically disadvantaged populations. Although significant strides have been made in expanding access to primary education, the quality of educational outcomes—particularly in secondary education—remains a pressing concern. The nearly universal gross enrolment rates at the primary school level, which stood at 99% and 98% in 2018 and 2019, respectively (World Bank, 2022), mask a more troubling reality: the persistently high rates of grade repetition and drop-outs, particularly in secondary education. Despite government accolades for consistently achieving matric pass rates above 70% over the past decade, these statistics conceal the fact that approximately one-quarter of learners fail their final high school examinations. Even more concerning is that less than 5% of learners who begin their schooling journey in primary school go on to obtain a university degree<sup>3</sup>. The declining enrolment and pass rates in critical subjects such as mathematics, accounting, and physical science further compound the problem, undermining efforts to improve educational outcomes<sup>4</sup>.

Central to this discussion is the Promotion and Progression Policy, which was introduced to regulate learner progression by limiting grade repetition to no more than four years within a particular phase. This policy, while well-intentioned, has been criticized for inadvertently exacerbating academic underperformance. The policy's stipulation that learners should progress with their age cohort, even in the absence of the requisite academic achievements, places undue pressure on educators who are tasked with remedying learners' deficits without adequate institutional support. As a result, teachers are left to juggle current curricular demands alongside the remediation of learning gaps, while many learners fail to engage meaningfully in their own educational development. Critics of the policy argue that it has contributed to an erosion of academic standards, particularly in schools located in economically disadvantaged areas, where the cumulative effect of socio-economic hardships and institutional inefficiencies further hinders educational progress.

In addition to the shortcomings of the Promotion and Progression Policy, the selected schools in this study face myriad in-school and out-of-school challenges. Institutional factors such as weak leadership, inconsistent governance, and inadequate resourcing have contributed to fluctuating pass rates over time. The influence of external factors, including the socio-economic conditions of the community, is equally significant. For example, poverty, food insecurity, and lack of access to basic resources all contribute to poor learner outcomes. Furthermore, the Eastern Cape, which encompasses the former Xhosa homelands of Transkei and Ciskei, was historically

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<sup>3</sup> Montfort Mlachila and Thalefang Moeletsi, "Struggling to Make the Grade: A Review of the Causes and Consequences of the Weak Outcomes of South Africa's Education System," *IMF Working Papers* 19, no. 47 (2019): 1, <http://dx.doi.org/10.5089/9781498301374.001>.

<sup>4</sup> B Macupe, "Students' Dreams Are Crumbling," *Mail & Guardian* (2020).

subjected to the racially discriminatory “Bantu” education system. The long-lasting impact of this system is evident in the persistently poor educational outcomes in the province. Notably, the Eastern Cape has the lowest average years of schooling compared to other provinces <sup>5</sup>, and the Amathole West District includes some of the worst-performing schools in the province <sup>6</sup>.

This study draws on both document analysis and primary data collected from four underperforming schools in the Amathole West District. The specific research objectives are as follows: (1) to identify and analyze the factors that contribute to low performance, grade repetition, and drop-out rates in the selected schools, and (2) to evaluate the effectiveness of the Promotion and Progression Policy in these schools, particularly in relation to observed academic outcomes.

The theoretical framework guiding this study is Bronfenbrenner’s <sup>7</sup>ecological systems theory, which provides a comprehensive lens through which to understand the complex, interrelated factors that influence educational outcomes. Bronfenbrenner’s model posits that educational achievement is shaped by multiple, nested systems that interact with one another. These systems range from micro-level factors, such as the classroom environment, to macro-level influences, such as national educational policies and socio-economic conditions <sup>8</sup>. In the context of this study, the Promotion and Progression Policy is examined as a macro-level influence that interacts with other systems, such as school leadership, classroom dynamics, and community socio-economic conditions, to shape learner outcomes. Bronfenbrenner’s model is particularly useful for understanding how contextual factors—both within and outside the school environment—contribute to variations in academic performance and how these factors can either support or hinder educational success.

Furthermore, Bronfenbrenner’s theory emphasizes the importance of considering the interplay between various systems in understanding educational outcomes. For example, weak school leadership may exacerbate the negative effects of the Promotion and Progression Policy, while strong leadership might mitigate some of these effects by fostering a supportive learning environment. Similarly, community-level factors, such as parental involvement and socio-economic stability, can significantly influence learner performance. Thus, this study seeks to explore the ways in which these various systems interact to shape educational outcomes in underperforming schools in the Eastern Cape.

## Method

This study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining both qualitative and quantitative research techniques to investigate the factors influencing underperformance in selected schools. The use of a mixed-methods design enabled a comprehensive analysis, where qualitative interviews

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<sup>5</sup> Statistics South Africa, 2021

<sup>6</sup> Ronelle Burger et al., “Use of Simulated Patients to Assess Hypertension Case Management at Public Healthcare Facilities in South Africa,” *Journal of Hypertension* 38, no. 2 (2020): 362–367.

<sup>7</sup> Steven C Hertler et al., “Urie Bronfenbrenner: Toward an Evolutionary Ecological Systems Theory,” *Life History Evolution: A Biological Meta-Theory for the Social Sciences* (2018): 323–339.

<sup>8</sup> N C Perron, “Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory,” *College student development: Applying theory to practice on the diverse campus* 197, no. 23 (2017): 1–10.

and discussions provided rich, in-depth insights, while the quantitative data facilitated measurement and objective comparison of school performance.

### Rationale for Selecting the Study Area

The Eastern Cape Province is predominantly rural and characterized by high levels of unemployment and illiteracy<sup>9</sup>. Within this region, the Amathole West education district, located in the eastern part of the province, includes some of the most underperforming education districts (Hompashe, 2018). This observation is supported by the 2011 population census, which found that the cluster A and B districts in the eastern part of the province consistently performed worse compared to the cluster C districts in the west (Department of Basic Education [DBE], 2013). The Amathole West district was specifically chosen for this study due to its high proportion of schools that underperformed in the 2018 National Senior Certificate (NSC) examinations. Table 2 below provides a breakdown of school district performance in 2018.

Table 2: School Districts' Performance in 2018

District Name	Number of Secondary Schools (2018)	Number of Schools Achieving Less Than 60%	Proportion of Underperforming Schools (%)
Alfred Nzo East	36	11	31%
Alfred Nzo West	75	17	23%
Amathole East	88	27	31%
Amathole West	95	59	62%
Buffalo City	125	39	31%
Chris Hani East	53	14	26%
Chris Hani West	87	35	40%
Joe Gqabi	49	19	39%
Nelson Mandela	99	24	24%
OR Tambo Coastal	69	19	28%
OR Tambo Inland	98	28	29%
Sarah Baartman	50	21	42%
Grand Total	924	313	

*Source: Primary data from the ECDOE, 2018.*

Despite implementing an operational plan aligned with the 2016–2018 Provincial Educational Transformation Plan, which included strategies such as merging small schools, strengthening district offices, and improving teacher training and resource allocation, the Amathole West district continued to underperform (ECDOE, 2018).

### Sample Selection

The researchers employed purposive sampling to select four secondary schools from the 59 underperforming schools in the Amathole West district. The schools were chosen based on their

<sup>9</sup> Eastern Cape Department of Education [ECDOE], 2015

socio-economic context, academic performance, and geographic proximity to the researcher, who resides in Cape Town. The sample included two schools in a semi-urban township, one in a rural area, and one in an urban area. All schools selected were classified as Quintile 3 institutions, meaning they do not charge school fees and operate in low-income communities (schools in Quintiles 1–3 are classified as no-fee schools, while Quintiles 4 and 5 charge fees).

The final sample consisted of four school principals, four Education District Officers (EDOs) from the Amathole West district, and three teachers from each school. The total sample included four principals and 12 educators.

### Data Collection Instruments

The study utilized different questionnaires tailored to the roles of principals and educators. Additionally, an interview schedule was prepared for the EDOs. The questionnaires facilitated semi-structured interviews with principals and educators teaching Grades 10–12 in the selected schools. In total, four principal questionnaires and 10 educator questionnaires were completed.

Originally, the study was designed for face-to-face engagement; however, due to the COVID-19 pandemic and its associated social distancing regulations, the researcher adopted non-contact data collection methods. Structured questionnaires were distributed via email, and follow-up communication with participants for clarification was conducted via telephone. Data collection commenced in March 2021 and concluded on June 30, 2021.

### Research Results and Discussion

Underperformance in South African schools, particularly in rural and disadvantaged areas, has been a subject of significant academic and policy discussion. The performance gap between well-resourced and under-resourced schools has been identified as a critical driver of educational inequality<sup>10</sup>. Several studies have highlighted that systemic challenges—ranging from teacher competence, poor infrastructure, and inadequate resources—disproportionately affect schools in rural areas, exacerbating learner underperformance<sup>11</sup>. Furthermore, policies such as the Promotion and Progression Policy, introduced to regulate grade repetition, have been criticized for promoting learners without ensuring they have achieved basic learning outcomes, contributing to a cycle of underperformance and increased drop-out rates<sup>12</sup>.

The concept of “learned helplessness”<sup>13</sup> also plays a crucial role in explaining why students who fail to grasp foundational knowledge early in their educational careers may disengage from learning

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<sup>10</sup> Servaas van der Berg et al., “Low Quality Education as a Poverty Trap,” *SSRN Electronic Journal* (2017); Servaas Van der Berg et al., “The Cost of Repetition in South Africa,” *SSRN Electronic Journal* (2019), <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3505854>.

<sup>11</sup> Grasia Chisango et al., “Teachers’ Perceptions of Adopting Information and Communication Technologies in Teaching and Learning at Rural Secondary Schools in Eastern Cape, South Africa,” *Africa Education Review* 17, no. 2 (2019): 1–19, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/18146627.2018.1491317>.

<sup>12</sup> Mlachila and Moeletsi, “Struggling to Make the Grade: A Review of the Causes and Consequences of the Weak Outcomes of South Africa’s Education System.”

<sup>13</sup> Bollen Mukela Chataa and David Nkengbeza, “Challenges Faced by Primary School Teachers in Implementing the Automatic Promotion Policy at a School in the Zambezi Region,” *Creative Education* 10, no. 07 (2019): 1731–1744, <http://dx.doi.org/10.4236/ce.2019.107123>.

altogether. This theory is supported by Spaull’s <sup>14</sup>work, which argues that learners who fall behind in early grades are unlikely to catch up, creating cumulative deficits in learning that manifest as poor academic performance and eventual drop-out. These findings are particularly relevant in rural and township schools, where socio-economic factors, such as poverty

The performance of schools in rural and disadvantaged areas in South Africa has been consistently linked to systemic inequities in resourcing, teacher quality, and infrastructure <sup>15</sup>. Studies have shown that these factors, combined with socio-economic challenges such as poverty and unemployment, disproportionately affect educational outcomes in these schools <sup>16</sup>. The issue of grade repetition, compounded by policies such as the Promotion and Progression Policy, has also received substantial attention. The policy, introduced to regulate grade advancement, is criticized for promoting students without ensuring that they have mastered the necessary competencies, which results in learners being pushed through the system while accumulating significant learning deficits <sup>17</sup>.

Another key concept relevant to this discussion is learned helplessness, where students, after repeated academic failures, lose motivation to engage in schoolwork and eventually disengage altogether. This theory is supported by Spaull's research, which argues that learners who do not grasp foundational concepts in early grades often struggle to catch up, and these gaps widen as they progress through the system. In rural contexts, additional challenges such as long travel distances to school and poor community support further exacerbate these issues <sup>18</sup>.

## Findings

### School Performance in Amathole West District (2016–2020)

Table 3 below outlines the annual pass rates for the selected schools over the five-year period from 2016 to 2020.

Table 3: Annual Pass Rates (2016–2020)

School	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	Average
(A) Township School	66%	42%	16%	47%	59%	46%
(B) Township School	80%	67%	56%	47%	65%	63%
(C) Urban School	30%	41%	42%	58%	55%	45%
(D) Rural School	23%	24%	23%	25%	20%	23%

*Source: Primary data*

According to the South African Schools Act (SASA), underperforming schools are defined as those achieving less than a 65% matric pass rate (Equal Education Law Centre, 2022). Based on this definition, Urban School ‘C’ and Rural School ‘D’ consistently underperformed, with Rural School D showing particularly low performance, averaging just 23% over the five years. The poor

<sup>14</sup> van der Berg et al., “Low Quality Education as a Poverty Trap.”

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.; Van der Berg et al., “The Cost of Repetition in South Africa.”

<sup>16</sup> Chisango et al., “Teachers’ Perceptions of Adopting Information and Communication Technologies in Teaching and Learning at Rural Secondary Schools in Eastern Cape, South Africa.”

<sup>17</sup> Mlachila and Moeletsi, “Struggling to Make the Grade: A Review of the Causes and Consequences of the Weak Outcomes of South Africa’s Education System.”

<sup>18</sup> John W Sipple and Brian O Brent, “Challenges and Strategies Associated with Rural School Settings,” *Handbook of Research in Education Finance and Policy* (Routledge, n.d.), <http://dx.doi.org/10.4324/9780203961063.ch34>.

performance of Rural School D is in line with research indicating that rural schools are often neglected in terms of resource allocation, infrastructure, and support from the Department of Basic Education<sup>19</sup>. Learners in rural schools are more likely to face challenges such as long travel distances, contributing to learner fatigue and reduced engagement in learning, which ultimately leads to lower pass rates<sup>20</sup>.

### **Operational Challenges and Leadership**

The investigation also uncovered significant operational and leadership challenges, particularly in Rural School D. Frequent changes in school leadership, coupled with inadequate district support, contributed to the school's deteriorating performance. Over a three-year period, the school had changed principals three times, resulting in a lack of continuity in management and strategy. This finding resonates with the literature on the importance of stable and effective leadership in educational settings<sup>21</sup>. Strong leadership is crucial for setting a school's vision, fostering collaboration among educators, and ensuring accountability in both teaching and learning (Spaull, 2019). The absence of these qualities in School D led to a dysfunctional learning environment, exacerbating the school's already poor performance.

By contrast, Urban School 'C', which showed signs of improvement in recent years, benefitted from strong leadership, characterized by a committed principal who effectively managed relationships with the school management team, educators, and parents. This aligns with findings from Scheerens & Creemers<sup>22</sup> that transformational leadership can significantly improve school performance, even in challenging socio-economic contexts. School 'C' saw an increase in pass rates over the principal's three-year tenure, underscoring the impact of leadership on academic outcomes.

### **Erratic Performance in Township Schools**

The pass rates of Township Schools 'A' and 'B' revealed erratic patterns over the five-year period. For example, Township School 'B' achieved an 80% pass rate in 2016, but this dropped to 47% in 2019 before recovering to 65% in 2020. This inconsistency is indicative of systemic instability, as outlined in Van der Berg et al.<sup>23</sup>, where schools serving low-income communities are often more vulnerable to fluctuations in performance due to factors such as teacher absenteeism, resource shortages, and high learner turnover. Additionally, the high failure rates in these schools were linked to significant grade repetition rates, further reflecting the inadequacies of the Promotion and Progression Policy<sup>24</sup>.

### **Amathole West School Drop-out Rates (2016–2021)**

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.; Burger et al., "Use of Simulated Patients to Assess Hypertension Case Management at Public Healthcare Facilities in South Africa."

<sup>20</sup> Sipple and Brent, "Challenges and Strategies Associated with Rural School Settings."

<sup>21</sup> Jaap Scheerens, "Effective Schooling: Research Theory and Practice" (1992).

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Van der Berg et al., "The Cost of Repetition in South Africa."

<sup>24</sup> Mlachila and Moeletsi, "Struggling to Make the Grade: A Review of the Causes and Consequences of the Weak Outcomes of South Africa's Education System."

The drop-out rates across the selected schools from 2016 to 2021 are presented in Table 4 below.

Table 4: Drop-Out Rates (2016–2021)

School	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	Total
(A) Township School	48	39	48	51	35	221
(B) Township School	12	3	38	19	18	90
(C) Urban School	50	20	5	24	7	106
(D) Rural School	16	13	1	15	9	54

*Source: Primary data*

The results show that three of the schools experienced high drop-out rates, with a total of 483 learners dropping out over the five-year period. Township Schools ‘A’ and ‘B’ saw the highest drop-out rates, with 221 and 90 learners respectively, while Rural School ‘D’ had the lowest drop-out rate (54 learners). However, the low drop-out rate at School D corresponds with its extremely high repetition rates, suggesting that learners are being retained in the system without significant progress, ultimately leading to failure. This finding is consistent with research by Van der Berg et al., which shows that repetition without remedial support exacerbates poor learner outcomes and leads to disengagement.

### Drop-out by Grade and Gender (2016–2020)

Table 5 provides a breakdown of drop-out rates by grade and gender, showing that most drop-outs occurred in Grades 10 and 11, a critical period for learners in the South African educational system.

Table 5: Drop-Out by Grade and Gender (2016–2021)

Grade	Gender		Total Count
	Female	Male	
8	41 (15.9%)	23 (8.9%)	64 (21.8%)
9	51 (19.8%)	20 (7.6%)	71 (23.4%)
10	90 (34.9%)	5 (1.9%)	95 (32.4%)
11	60 (23.3%)	10 (3.8%)	70 (23.9%)
12	16 (6.2%)	1 (0.4%)	17 (5.6%)

*Source: Primary data*

These findings reflect the significant drop-out rates occurring in Grade 10 (33.6%), coinciding with the transition to the Senior Phase. This is consistent with other studies<sup>25</sup> that identify Grade 10 as a particularly challenging point for learners, where subject specialization, increased workload, and socio-economic pressures converge, resulting in higher drop-out rates. This transition often places learners under increased academic pressure, while also exposing them to socio-economic challenges such as substance abuse, unplanned pregnancies, and family responsibilities<sup>26</sup>.

<sup>25</sup> Statistics South Africa, 2021

<sup>26</sup> Emekako Raymond and Ward Lesego, “Contributing Factors to Learner Drop Out in a Public School in Ngaka,” *The Social Sciences* 12, no. 3 (2017): 459–466.

## Discussion

The findings of this study align closely with existing literature on educational underperformance, particularly in disadvantaged and rural regions of South Africa. The underperformance of schools in the Amathole West District is not unique but rather reflects broader systemic issues that have been highlighted in previous studies. Research has consistently shown that factors such as inadequate teacher training, poor leadership, insufficient resources, and the socio-economic challenges faced by learners are key contributors to poor educational outcomes<sup>27</sup>. This study confirms these findings, revealing that schools located in economically disadvantaged areas, particularly rural schools, face multiple, overlapping challenges that impede their ability to provide quality education.

## Leadership and School Management

The role of school leadership was a significant factor influencing the performance of the schools in this study, particularly when comparing Rural School D and Urban School C. Scheerens and Creemers<sup>28</sup> emphasize the importance of strong, transformational leadership in educational settings, which is supported by the relative success of Urban School C. Despite being located in a high-poverty area, the strong leadership of the principal contributed to improved pass rates. The principal's ability to foster a positive school culture, maintain effective communication with parents, and manage the school's resources effectively allowed for a level of resilience against external socio-economic pressures. This aligns with Spaul's assertion that no education system can rise above the quality of its educators and leadership.

Conversely, the leadership instability at Rural School D severely impacted its performance. Frequent leadership changes, coupled with minimal district support, created an environment of uncertainty and disengagement among staff and learners. The study found that the principal's inexperience and the lack of continuity in management practices contributed to the school's dysfunction. This is in line with Hompashe<sup>29</sup>, who argues that rural schools, often isolated and under-resourced, are particularly vulnerable to leadership instability. The findings suggest that stable, experienced leadership is critical for overcoming some of the inherent challenges faced by schools in disadvantaged areas.

## The Role of Socio-Economic Factors

The socio-economic context in which these schools operate cannot be overlooked. As noted by Sipple and Brent<sup>30</sup>, rural learners often face unique challenges, including long travel distances to school, which contributes to fatigue, absenteeism, and reduced time for learning. In this study, the rural location of School D, combined with high poverty levels, was a significant factor in its

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<sup>27</sup> van der Berg et al., "Low Quality Education as a Poverty Trap"; Van der Berg et al., "The Cost of Repetition in South Africa"; Chisango et al., "Teachers' Perceptions of Adopting Information and Communication Technologies in Teaching and Learning at Rural Secondary Schools in Eastern Cape, South Africa."

<sup>28</sup> Scheerens, "Effective Schooling: Research Theory and Practice."

<sup>29</sup> Burger et al., "Use of Simulated Patients to Assess Hypertension Case Management at Public Healthcare Facilities in South Africa."

<sup>30</sup> Sipple and Brent, "Challenges and Strategies Associated with Rural School Settings."

poor performance. Many learners in rural areas are forced to prioritize family responsibilities or employment over their education, which directly impacts their engagement and academic success

<sup>31</sup>.

The high repetition rates in Rural School D also underscore the inadequacies of the Promotion and Progression Policy. This policy, which is intended to limit the number of years a learner can spend in one phase, has had unintended consequences, particularly in schools with limited resources. The findings from this study suggest that learners who are promoted without mastering foundational skills struggle to cope with the increased demands of higher grades, leading to high failure and repetition rates. This resonates with Mlachila and Moeletsi's <sup>32</sup>critique of the policy, which argues that promoting learners without adequate support only exacerbates their learning deficits.

### **Grade Repetition and Drop-Out Rates**

The study's findings on the relationship between grade repetition and drop-out rates support the view that repetition without targeted intervention is counterproductive. Spaul argues that early learning gaps, particularly in foundational subjects such as literacy and numeracy, are difficult to reverse, and this study provides further evidence of this phenomenon. The high drop-out rates, particularly in Grade 10, highlight the long-term consequences of accumulated learning deficits. As learners progress through the school system without mastering basic skills, their disengagement increases, leading to eventual drop-out. This is consistent with Van der Berg et al. , who note that the South African education system's high drop-out rates are a result of learners falling further behind each year, culminating in their exit from the system before completing matric.

The concentration of drop-outs in Grade 10 is a particularly important finding. In South Africa, Grade 10 is a pivotal year when learners begin to specialize in subjects aligned with their career prospects. The increased difficulty of the curriculum, combined with socio-economic pressures such as substance abuse, pregnancy, and the need to contribute to household income, results in many learners leaving school during this phase <sup>33</sup>. The data from this study show that both males and females are affected, although slightly more males dropped out, which is consistent with broader trends in South Africa (Statistics South Africa, 2021). These findings underscore the need for targeted interventions during the critical transition from junior secondary to senior secondary education.

### **Policy Implications and Systemic Challenges**

The Promotion and Progression Policy remains a point of contention in the South African education system. While the policy aims to reduce the negative effects of grade repetition, such as stigmatization and disengagement, it has inadvertently resulted in learners being promoted without the necessary skills to succeed in higher grades. This has been particularly damaging in schools

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Mlachila and Moeletsi, "Struggling to Make the Grade: A Review of the Causes and Consequences of the Weak Outcomes of South Africa's Education System."

<sup>33</sup> Raymond and Lesego, "Contributing Factors to Learner Drop Out in a Public School in Ngaka."

serving disadvantaged communities, where teachers are already overburdened and under-resourced. The findings from this study confirm that the policy, as it currently stands, is not adequately addressing the needs of learners in underperforming schools. Educators in this study reported that the policy places an additional burden on teachers, who are expected to teach learners both the current grade's curriculum and remediate the gaps from previous years. This dual responsibility, in the context of large class sizes and limited resources, is untenable and contributes to high failure and drop-out rates<sup>34</sup>.

Moreover, the lack of government support in implementing the policy effectively in under-resourced schools was a recurring theme in the interviews. Chisango et al.<sup>35</sup> highlight that many schools in South Africa, particularly those in Quintiles 1 to 3, operate with significant infrastructural and material deficits, such as a lack of libraries, laboratories, and teaching aids. These deficits make it nearly impossible for schools to provide the remedial support that is essential for learners who are promoted despite not meeting the required standards. The Eastern Cape, in particular, has some of the most under-resourced schools in the country, many of which still operate in dilapidated buildings, further exacerbating the challenge<sup>36</sup>.

The findings of this study reinforce the view that educational underperformance in South Africa, particularly in rural and disadvantaged regions, is a multifaceted issue driven by a combination of poor leadership, socio-economic challenges, inadequate resources, and ineffective policy implementation. The Promotion and Progression Policy, while well-intentioned, has had unintended negative consequences, particularly in schools that are already struggling to provide basic education. The study highlights the need for a more nuanced approach to policy implementation, one that takes into account the specific needs of under-resourced schools and provides the necessary support to both learners and educators. Without such interventions, the cycle of underperformance, repetition, and drop-out is likely to continue, with long-term consequences for both the learners and the broader South African economy.

1. Policy Revision: The Promotion and Progression Policy should be reviewed to include targeted support for learners who are promoted without meeting academic standards. This support should include remedial teaching, smaller class sizes, and additional resources for teachers.
2. Leadership Development: Investment in leadership training for school principals, particularly in rural and underperforming schools, is critical. Effective leadership has been shown to improve school outcomes even in challenging contexts.
3. Increased Resourcing for Rural Schools: Addressing the infrastructural deficits in rural schools is essential for improving learner outcomes. This includes providing access to basic educational materials, as well as developing transportation solutions to reduce the burden of long travel distances on learners.

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<sup>34</sup> Endeley Margaret Nalova, "School Type and Mathematics Achievement in English-Speaking Primary Schools in Cameroon: Implications for Technological Development," *American Journal of Educational Research* 5, no. 5 (2017): 568–573, <http://dx.doi.org/10.12691/education-5-5-15>.

<sup>35</sup> Chisango et al., "Teachers' Perceptions of Adopting Information and Communication Technologies in Teaching and Learning at Rural Secondary Schools in Eastern Cape, South Africa."

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

4. Support for At-Risk Learners: Early intervention programs targeting learners at risk of drop-out, particularly in Grade 10, should be implemented. These programs should focus on academic support, as well as addressing the socio-economic factors that contribute to drop-out, such as poverty, substance abuse, and family responsibilities.

## Conclusion

This study examined the factors contributing to underperformance, grade repetition, and school drop-out in underperforming schools within the Amathole West District of South Africa, a region marked by historical and socio-economic disadvantages. The research focused on the impact of the Promotion and Progression Policy, implemented in 2013, and its role in exacerbating the challenges faced by these schools. The findings confirm that underperformance, grade repetition, and drop-out rates remain persistent issues in historically marginalized schools, where academic underachievement is compounded by deficiencies in school management, governance, and resource allocation, as well as threats to the safety and well-being of students and staff.

The study explored the specific factors influencing low performance in four secondary schools selected from the 59 underperforming schools in the district, based on their performance in the 2018 National Senior Certificate (NSC) examinations. The Amathole West District was chosen due to its high concentration of underperforming schools, which consistently displayed poor academic outcomes over the examined period. The research highlighted that a significant number of school drop-outs occur during the transition to the Senior Phase, particularly in Grade 10, and that most drop-outs take place during the first half of the academic year.

The Promotion and Progression Policy emerged as a key factor contributing to the underperformance of the schools studied. Educators reported that the policy fails to achieve its intended goals, as it allows learners to be promoted to the next grade without having mastered the content of the current grade. This has placed additional burdens on teachers, who are tasked with addressing both current curriculum requirements and the learning deficits of promoted students. Teachers generally hold a negative view of automatic promotion, as it undermines the learning process and exacerbates academic failure, particularly in under-resourced schools.

The findings of this study underscore the broader crisis facing South Africa's basic education system, particularly in disadvantaged areas like the Amathole West District. Until the government acknowledges the depth of this crisis and takes ownership of the responsibility to address it, the systemic issues that perpetuate poverty and low educational outcomes will continue to impact future generations. Comprehensive policy reforms, increased resources, and targeted support for both learners and educators are essential if the cycle of underperformance and failure in public education is to be broken.

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