

Progressed Learners as a Burden for Teachers: A Case of Selected Participants from Limpopo Province, South Africa

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EDITORIAL DATES

Received: 19 September 2024

Revised: 25 February 2025

Accepted: 05 March 2025

Published: 01 June 2025

Copyright:

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Published by [ERRCDF Forum](#).

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DOI: [10.38140/ijer-2025.vol7.s1.14](https://doi.org/10.38140/ijer-2025.vol7.s1.14)

Abstract: This study examines teachers' perspectives on the academic performance of progressed learners. The research adopted an interpretive paradigm aligned with qualitative methods, using purposive sampling to engage 10 Grade 12 teachers through semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis of the data revealed that progressed learners are often segregated, struggle with understanding English as a Language of Learning and Teaching, find it difficult to cope with the workload in Grade 12, and most come from child-headed families. The study concludes that most teachers are dissatisfied with progressed learners because they did not meet the requirements for progression, and if they perform poorly, teachers feel they are to blame. It is recommended that teachers be trained and equipped with the necessary teaching strategies for handling progressed learners, particularly those who progressed after meeting the progression requirements. The Department of Basic Education (DBE) should monitor the progress of these learners and obtain regular feedback from teachers regarding their academic performance. This can help identify cases where both teachers and learners need support.

Teachers should not compromise the quality of education by teaching in the learners' vernacular; instead, they should teach in English, as assessments are conducted in English. The School-Based Support Teams (SBSTs) should identify progressed learners who are heading families and seek support for them from relevant individuals or departments. Parents and teachers should sign a memorandum of understanding outlining their roles in supporting progressed learners. Additionally, progressed learners should be taught skills to help them cope with the pressures of the new grade.

Keywords: Progressed learners, teachers' perspectives, progression, progression policy.

1. Introduction

Learners must have failed a particular grade two times to qualify for automatic progression (Department of Basic Education, 2017). The progression of learners who have not passed the grade (class) to the next one comes with challenges for teachers who deal with these learners daily during curriculum implementation. This automatic progression is only applied to those learners who failed the grade for at least two consecutive years. The DBE introduced the progression policy to minimise the high dropout rate of learners (DBE, 2013) due to failure to meet the promotion requirements. This policy set criteria for identifying learners to be progressed, and these criteria are that learners:

- Must have failed a particular grade twice.
- Must have attended school regularly.
- Ought to have complied with the school-based assessments in all subjects.

Those who fall into the category of those to be progressed to be allowed to go to Grade 12, where the matric examination is to be written, are to be scrutinised to be sure that they have passed at least four out of the seven subjects offered. So, if learners meet all these criteria, they are progressed to the next grade. These learners are exempted from meeting the promotion requirements with the hope that they will get enough support from teachers in the next grade (Nkosi & Adebayo, 2021) so that they do well. This progression policy is in line with Inclusive Education, which ensures that every learner receives education and progresses to the next grade.

How to cite this article:

Dube, M. C. (2025). Progressed learners as a burden for teachers: A case of selected participants from Limpopo Province, South Africa. *Interdisciplinary Journal of Education Research*, 7(s1), a14. <https://doi.org/10.38140/ijer-2025.vol7.s1.14>

Learner progression is not unique to South Africa. For example, in Uganda, it is called “automatic promotion”; in Cameroon, it is called “automatic progression” (Mogale & Malatji, 2022), whereas in the United States (US), United Kingdom (UK), and Europe, it is called social promotion (George, 2019). However, this learner progression comes with some contestations. While the proponents of this policy claim that it helps to avoid learner dropout before completion (Kolobe & Mihai, 2023), its opponents maintain that it lowers the quality of education (Costa et al., 2024). According to Kolobe and Mihai (2023), the main opponents of this progression policy are teachers. This can be the case for two reasons. Firstly, they are the ones who deal with these progressed learners on a daily basis, so they know what is going on in classroom situations. Secondly, this may suggest that they were never consulted from the beginning, so they do not see themselves as part and parcel of this policy; hence it can be argued they are a burden to teachers.

Teachers are expected to conform to the Department of Basic Education (DBE) policy and teach learners who have failed dismally, together with those who passed; isn't this a burden for teachers? How do they teach these two sets of learners in the same class? Are they prepared for this mammoth task? Who gets the blame if these students fail again after being progressed? These questions need answers to conclude who needs to take on the burden of helping these progressed learners. The concept of ‘burden’ refers to a heavy load that teachers, without choice, are expected to carry. It is a burden because teachers already have a load of learners who progress after meeting minimum requirements and are now in the grade, so they need to be taught and supported. However, the progressed learners add another heavier load to teachers since they were ‘pushed’ to the next grade without meeting minimum requirements. Learner progression addresses Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4, which entails ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all. With the learner progression policy, the DBE wants to ascertain that all learners receive education regardless of their academic performance. By so doing, in line with SDG 4, learner progression provides learning opportunities for all learners, irrespective of their performance. Therefore, the introduction and implementation of learner progression policy ensure that inclusive, equitable, and quality education is achieved by all learners through non-discrimination based on academic performance.

Progressed learners face several challenges in a school environment. One significant challenge is the stigma associated with their status (Costa et al., 2024). Since other learners and teachers are aware that these learners did not pass the previous grade, it can result in them being labelled differently. Many progressed learners may struggle to keep up with the academic demands of the higher grade (Costa et al., 2024) due to their previous failures. Munje and Maarman (2016) raised concerns regarding learner progression, arguing that it impacts learners’ self-esteem and the availability of support systems necessary to facilitate their coping process. Knowing that one is in a particular grade not because of meeting the requirements, and that everyone is aware of this, can be detrimental to progressed learners’ self-esteem. Teachers are expected to support these learners; however, the necessary resources may not be available, and without these resources, their efforts can be undermined.

1.1 Problem statement

Grade 12 teachers face a mammoth task of teaching progressed learners who failed to achieve the minimum requirements for promotion. Teachers are expected to do this in addition to the learners promoted on merit. Progressed learners add another burden to the Grade 12 teachers since they need extra support beyond what Grade 12 teachers should offer to those promoted on merit. The question is, therefore, how should teachers deal with the progressed learners while, at the same time, dealing with those who progressed after achieving minimum promotional requirements? The Annual Teaching Plans (ATPs) from the DBE stipulate the work to be completed in certain weeks (ATP, 2023-2024). These plans guide teachers on what should be done and when it should be done. This compels

teachers to chase deadlines to complete tasks set by the DBE. Another question is: how do Grade 12 teachers deal with progressed learners while chasing deadlines for tasks to be completed as per the ATP? The DBE relies on teachers to devise teaching strategies that can help support the progressed learners (Muedi et al., 2021) beyond the normal timetable (Mogale & Malatji, 2022). Grade 12 teachers face all these challenges and have to deal with them daily because, in the end, they are accountable to the School Management Team (SMT) and other relevant stakeholders regarding learners' academic performance, including progressed learners. Therefore, teachers are bound to have perspectives on the progressed learners based on their interactions in classroom situations. Their experiences inform the type of activities they design for the progressed learners, and their experiences can also shed light on whether they cope with teaching the progressed learners or not.

Against this backdrop, this study examined teachers' perspectives on the academic performance of progressed learners. The perspectives from teachers who deal with the progressed learners daily helped to understand the issues involved in teaching the progressed learners. This paper also proposes strategies for dealing with the progressed learners. The findings will inform both teachers and progressed learners of how to cope with the situation, since it may be a challenge for both parties.

1.1.1 Research question

This study was guided by one research question, which is: How do teachers view the academic performance of progressed learners in the new grades (classes)?

2. Materials

The introduction of a progression policy, globally, aimed to reduce learner retention and curb the dropout rate (Makhanya, 2021). This was also the case in South Africa when the policy was introduced in 2013. The School-Based Support Team (SBST) is responsible for monitoring and reporting on the progress of progressed learners (DBE, 2015). However, there are many contestations regarding the reception and effectiveness of this policy. For example, in Botswana, the policy is viewed as an obstacle to the basic right to education (Aobakwe & Kabo, 2019). In Kenya, this practice of "social promotion," which is equivalent to learner progression, is believed to contribute to learner dropout rates (Wekesa et al., 2019). In Rwanda, the same policy is regarded as detrimental to quality education (Wekesa et al., 2019) because it permits learners who do not meet the criteria for progression to advance to the next grade. In Florida, in the US, learners qualified for progression only upon achieving a certain level of competence; in other words, not everyone who failed more than twice in a grade was automatically progressed. Although a progression policy is implemented in various countries, its application differs from one nation to another. Brahmabhatt (2020) claims that the success of this policy largely depends on the support provided to learners.

The attitude of some teachers towards the progression policy does not support it because they generally oppose this policy (Stott et al., 2015). Teachers have complained that this policy demoralises and overloads them (Brahmbhatt, 2020). This demoralisation may stem from the awareness that these progressed learners did not meet the requirements for progression, indicating they were not ready to advance. The overload arises from the expectation by the DBE that teachers should offer support outside the normal school timetable for these progressed learners to achieve the desired goals. Teachers also view the progression policy as a 'waste of learners' time' (Nkosi, 2019), and most believe that this policy is detrimental to both teachers and learners (Brahmbhatt, 2020). Additionally, teachers lament that they do not receive the necessary support from the DBE (Nkosi, 2019). Brahmabhatt (2020) outlines further concerns from teachers regarding progressed learners. The first issue was time constraints, which prevented them from adequately supporting progressed learners. The second issue was the need for training designed to help teachers manage the curriculum for progressed learners. The third issue was that the content coverage stipulated by the ATP did not provide enough time to address concepts thoroughly for the benefit of progressed learners. The

fourth issue was the excessive number of assessments, which affected the time available for teaching and support. The fifth issue was that these progressed learners lacked discipline and interest, which negatively impacted teacher morale. The sixth issue was that progressed learners faced challenges due to missing fundamental building blocks of prerequisite knowledge. The seventh and final issue raised was that language barriers were a concern for teachers. These factors likely explain why teachers are not proponents of this policy, as they are dissatisfied with various aspects that inform their opposition to it.

Dlamini (2020) notes that progressed learners experience marginalisation and exclusion, leading to stigmatization since they advance to the next grade without being academically prepared and without having earned the promotion. In line with this, Mogale and Modipane (2021) assert that the implementation of a progression policy can lead to increases in the Grade 12 failure rate while more learners remain in the system. Grossen et al. (2017) argue that most progressed learners in South Africa continue to perform poorly and do not meet the minimum pass requirements. Additionally, George (2019) states that these progressed learners continue to fail even though they have been provided with support measures and intervention strategies specifically designed for them. Grossen et al. (2017) further argue that the progressed learners encounter difficulties that hinder them from meeting the minimum requirements for Grade 12, primarily due to their inability to cope with work pressure. This undermines the rationale for progressing learners towards obtaining a Grade 12 certificate, as they fail even after being progressed (Mogale & Modipane, 2021). Mogale and Modipane (2021) conclude by arguing that most progressed learners are almost inevitably destined to fail along the way, leading to increased dropout rates. Therefore, progressing learners may not be a viable solution to preventing or eliminating dropouts.

George (2019) identifies three rationales for learner progression: support strategies, alternatives to grade repetition, and improving equity and learner retention. Parents or guardians should have the final say on whether a child/learner can be progressed. However, in a study conducted by Mogale and Modipane (2021), some interviewed parents reported that they were not consulted during the implementation of this progression policy and were not responsible for the final decision regarding their children/learners' progression. For teachers to understand the implementation procedures and strategies, they had to read circulars that were not easily interpretable (Mogale & Modipane, 2021). This has led some to question the credibility of progressing learners if schools do not adhere to the procedures.

3. Methodology

This inquiry adopted an interpretive paradigm because it allows for the exploration of life experiences (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2023); hence, it enabled the researcher to investigate teachers' perspectives on the academic performance of progressed learners. To complement the interpretive paradigm, a qualitative approach was deemed relevant for this study. This was because this approach emphasises the in-depth richness of context and perspectives of participants (Lim, 2024). Since this study intended to explore social issues to understand teachers' behaviour (Alam, 2021) as they interact with progressed learners, a case study was appropriate for this exercise. This study employed purposive sampling, which enabled the researcher to select participants based on their meeting the set characteristics (Stratton, 2024). Ten Grade 12 teachers were sampled for this study from Buhananwa Circuit in Limpopo, as they belonged to this circuit and were teaching progressed learners.

For data generation, these teachers were engaged through semi-structured interviews, as these allowed for interjections and follow-up questions during the interviews, thus bringing more clarity to the data gathered. After data generation, thematic analysis was adopted to analyse the data because it enables the researcher to sort and code the data (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018), facilitating the construction of themes. Before undertaking this study, ethics were considered by obtaining

ethical clearance from the university and permission to conduct the study from the Department of Basic Education, as well as having participants sign consent forms, which ensured that they participated voluntarily. They were assured that their identities would be protected by using pseudonyms. Participants were labelled T1, T2, T3, T4, T5, T6, T7, T8, T9, and T10.

3.1 Ethical consideration

Before undertaking this research, the researcher ensured that ethics were considered. Ethics clearance was sought from both the university and the Department of Basic Education in Limpopo Province since the research involved teachers. This was followed by the collection of consent forms from participants, wherein they declared their voluntary participation. To ensure anonymity, pseudonyms were used for participants, as indicated in the previous section.

4. Presentation of Findings

This paper sought to examine teachers' perspectives on the academic performance of progressed learners. After identifying patterns and coding, themes were constructed. This section presents five themes: progressed learners are segregated; understanding English as a language of learning and teaching is problematic; progressed learners struggle to cope with the amount of work in Grade 12; lack of parental involvement; and most progressed learners come from child-headed families.

4.1 Progressed learners are segregated

According to participants, some progressed learners found it difficult to interact with other classmates who were not progressed because they were segregated by both classmates and teachers. This was confirmed by the assertions of T2 and T6:

T2: "Even in class they share desks as progressed learners, it's like they are friends who don't want to mix with the group of learners not progressed".

T6: "When you give group work in class, progressed learners do not want to mix with other learners who were not progressed, but they form their own groups until you as a teacher disband that group and create it otherwise"

The progressed learners seem to be uncomfortable in the class. They hardly mix with other classmates who have not progressed. They seem to struggle to be on par with learners who have not progressed and have developed a negative self-concept due to being progressed automatically. This implies that being progressed to the next grade, despite not having met the requirements, impacts negatively on some progressed learners; they do not feel welcome in the new classroom.

4.2 Progressed learners struggle with understanding English language

According to participants, the understanding of English as a medium of learning and teaching is another challenge for progressed learners, such that some progressed learners struggle to understand the content when it is taught in English. The problem is that English is not their vernacular but a First Additional Language, and it has become a barrier to their learning.

T1: They cannot read properly on English and Home Language (Sepedi), and that creates a delay on others who can do well.

T4: It think, the issue of teaching in English is more problematic for the progressed learners.

The problem of progressed learners is not only in understanding English, but some progressed learners cannot read either English or their home language, e.g. Sepedi. One of the causes of the failure to understand English is that some progressed learners are taught in their vernacular or mother tongue. Unfortunately, these progressed learners are expected to learn and write assessments in English. The situation these progressed learners find themselves in seems uncondusive to their learning; hence, they struggle to perform well academically.

4.3 Progressed learners struggle to cope with the amount of work in grade 12

The findings show that progressed learners are expected to complete a significant amount of work that they did not accomplish in previous grades, and they struggle to manage the workload for Grade 12. The participants also expressed concern that some of these progressed learners are not serious about their schoolwork.

T5: Most of the progressed learners normally do not do homework given to them and if they did it is incomplete and you can see they struggle with amount of work they should do in Grade 12, maybe that's why they should not have been progressed.

T10: Another issue is that progressed learners tend to be not serious with their schoolwork, and as a result when they are in Grade 12, subjects are now advanced, and they cannot cope with the amount of work.

Some progressed learners fail to complete the homework assigned to them by their teachers, creating challenges for educators. Additionally, some of these learners do not fully engage with their schoolwork, indicating a lack of seriousness. This behaviour also appears to contribute to their repetition of the same grade. This may suggest that their lack of seriousness in completing the work assigned by teachers has led to their failure to progress by merit. It may also indicate that they struggle to understand how to complete the tasks assigned to them. Therefore, being a progressed learner seems to pose these kinds of problems and becomes a burden for teachers who must ensure that progressed learners meet the desired learning outcomes for their current grade by the end of the year.

4.4 Most progressed learners come from child-headed families

Another challenge for teachers when dealing with progressed learners is that most of the progressed learners come from child-headed families, meaning they do not have parents. This, on its own, implies that they do not account to anyone in terms of schoolwork at home; they do as they please. This also means that after school, they need to be parents, not learners, and this may interfere with their schoolwork. Acting as parents requires them to look after their younger siblings, and this can rob them of time to do their schoolwork. The absence of parents is a challenge for teachers since learning and teaching need parents to support learners.

T6: Also, it is difficult to bring parents in the picture because some of these kids come from child-headed families.

T7: Let me say most of the progressed and risk learners come from child-headed households, meanwhile some of those from families with parents are doing well.

T3: Some parents have passed away, others working in farms and others outside the village hence they are unavailable.

T9: Even weekends we are here to assist learners, we also try to engage parents but the challenge is that $\pm 80\%$ of parents are not there to support the process.

Having progressed learners being children/learners during the day and parents in the afternoon creates challenges for them; they may not have enough time to do their schoolwork and hence poor academic performance. While some of these parents are deceased, others are working far from home, and they cannot attend to teaching and learning matters for their children. Therefore, this lack of parental involvement, resulting in child-headed families, negatively affects the academic performance of progressed learners.

5. Discussion of Findings

Findings show that progressed learners are not treated like other learners who received progression after meeting requirements from previous grades; instead, they are segregated. This segregation is confirmed by Costa et al. (2024), who argue that progressed learners develop a stigma associated with their status. This stigma can affect their psychological domain. As a result, it becomes difficult

for them to undertake their teaching and learning activities, as they may be psychologically affected. Unfortunately, the way they feel has a bearing on their academic performance because, to progress to the next grade, they need a positive mindset that can enable them to put effort into their schoolwork. What happens to these progressed learners complements an argument from Munje and Maarman (2016) that learner progression can impact the self-esteem of the learner, as some of them seem to lack positive self-esteem. One of the aims of the introduction of the progression policy is to promote the emotional well-being of learners (DBE, 2015), but it appears that the emotional well-being of progressed learners is in shambles.

Poor backgrounds and insufficient exposure to English lead progressed learners to struggle with content knowledge understanding (Molteno, 2017), resulting in poor academic performance. Teachers may also be subjected to blame since some teach learners in their home language but assess them in English. This affects progressed learners who find using English difficult. Ntombela et al. (2020) assert that the English language plays a significant role in children's learning. English is a tool used for learning different subjects, but without it, there may be no effective learning and teaching. The literature review reveals the significance of English as a medium of instruction and shows that without mastery of the English language, learners may struggle with mastering the content. Therefore, what happens with progressed learners supports assertions from the literature that understanding English as the Language of Learning and Teaching is the basis for understanding content knowledge in other subjects. If progressed learners struggle with English, their progression may be a waste of time (Nkosi, 2019). The inability to understand English may influence their self-concept (Trepte & Loy, 2017). The lack of understanding of English can, therefore, negatively influence the self-concept of these progressed learners.

Teachers are unhappy that some of these progressed learners are not serious about their schoolwork. It must be borne in mind that doing schoolwork diligently can lead to academic achievement. If some progressed learners do not do homework and complete the given tasks as expected, they may be set up for failure. If progressed learners dodge schoolwork, that demoralises and overloads teachers (Brahmbhatt, 2020). It is for such a reason that George (2019) complains that even though support is provided for these progressed learners, they may fail to progress on their own because they do not take the schoolwork seriously. The fact that teachers are not trained to deal with progressed learners (Brahmbhatt, 2020) places a greater burden on teachers. Chere and Hlalele (2014) note that the failure to work to their potential, as is the case with some progressed learners, can result in underachievement. The failure of progressed learners to do the work is informed by the choices they make, which can be subject to the disapproval of teachers (Westminster Institute of Education, 2006). Maybe these progressed learners failed to meet minimum progression requirements because they were not coping with the work given to them. Unfortunately, when progressed learners do not cope with schoolwork and they fail, teachers take the blame, and this can negatively impact teachers' morale.

The perspectives of teachers reveal that it is difficult to deal with progressed learners from child-headed families because these learners do not get the required and expected support from home or parents. Child-headed families mean that these progressed learners do not have parents, so they are on their own, and this affects their schoolwork. The children from child-headed families are caregivers for their siblings, and since they do not have adults to take care of the younger ones, they struggle to get food, shelter, access to health facilities, clothes, and other essentials (Mohlakwana, 2013). Learning is difficult for these progressed learners since they have many adult responsibilities that they are expected to undertake after school. So, without a conducive environment, progressed learners may not perform well academically. The progressed learners from child-headed families have emotional and psychological problems (DePanfilis, 2006) and can feel isolated, leading to lifelong challenges with low self-esteem, insecurity, and anxiety. Low self-esteem can affect learning because a learner can feel negative about him/herself, and that can affect performance. Self-esteem

is very important for learners to perform well at school. Newlin et al. (2016) lament that if there is no parent at home, children misbehave, and this has a bearing on their learning. It seems unlikely that learners who misbehave at home will behave at school. On the same note, Murray et al. (2015) postulate that parent-teacher communication can be a powerful motivator for learners. The unavailability of parents has serious repercussions for learners' academic performance since learners should account to parents about their learning.

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

This paper sought to examine the perspectives of teachers on the academic performance of progressed learners. The findings revealed that progressed learners are segregated, they struggle with understanding English as a Language of Learning and Teaching, and progressed learners struggle to cope with the amount of work in Grade 12; most progressed learners come from child-headed families. Therefore, this research study concludes that teachers are unhappy with the progression of learners who did not meet the minimum requirements for progression. Teaching these learners becomes a burden for teachers since they deal with them on a daily basis, and some of these learners do not put any effort into doing their schoolwork. Regardless of whether progressed learners do schoolwork or not, teachers need to account for the performance of these learners. Teachers also need to ensure that these learners are supported with extra hours. Even when teachers do the best they can, some progressed learners do not cooperate by doing the required schoolwork. This study also concludes that the lack of understanding of English as a language of teaching and learning hinders progressed learners in achieving learning outcomes because it robs them of a chance to understand the content knowledge they need. Some progressed learners are ostracised by their classmates. This does not only affect their self-concepts and self-esteem but also their morale; this impacts their academic performance. Lastly, progressed learners from child-headed families struggle to cope with schoolwork since they have parental responsibilities before and after school. At the same time, they need to do schoolwork.

Even though this inquiry revealed findings, it had its own limitations. This study adopted a case study approach, implying that the findings cannot be generalised. Using 10 participants may have its own limitations in that engaging more participants may have brought some additional ideas. The localisation of this study to rural Limpopo may have affected the findings compared to semi-urban and urban areas. Also, the use of interviews may have limited the participants and thus impacted the findings.

Dealing with the progressed learners in the same class as those who progressed on merit burdens teachers. As a sequel to that, this study recommends that teachers be trained and equipped with the necessary teaching strategies for handling progressed learners and those who progressed after meeting the progression requirements. This will ensure that progressed learners are supported to achieve the set goals, since they need more support than other learners. The ostracisation of the progressed learners impacts their academic performance, thus developing negative self-esteem. These learners need counselling to understand what it means to progress the way they have progressed, and this will help them understand what is expected of them. The DBE should monitor the progress of the progressed learners and get feedback from teachers regularly so that they can comprehend the academic performance of these progressed learners; the DBE should not make this a burden for teachers only. The strategy of teachers to teach Further Education and Training learners in their vernacular inhibits learners' understanding of English, making it difficult for learners to articulate content knowledge during assessments. Teachers should refrain from compromising the quality of education by empathising with learners and teaching them in their vernacular; teachers should teach in English so that learners become accustomed to it and this can help them understand English and write assessments on their own effectively. SBSTs should identify the progressed learners who are heading families and seek support from the DBE; teachers can also liaise with social

workers so that these progressed learners who are heading families can be supported. Schools should also find a special way of treating and supporting these learners since they have a lot on their plates. The teachers should do their best to support these progressed learners and must try to fill the gap of absent parents. Where a child has parents, they should enter into a memorandum of understanding with the teachers before their learners are progressed, and the roles they should play must be outlined clearly.

7. Declarations

Funding: This research did not receive any external funding.

Acknowledgements: The author wishes to thank Dr M Moloto, the project leader, for ensuring that everything goes smoothly during the engagement with participants and that all logistics to enable the completion of this inquiry were addressed amicably.

Conflict of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Data Availability: The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. Access will be granted to researchers who meet the criteria for data sharing established by the institutional review board or ethics committee.

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