

## The effects of 100% grade seven progression rate policy on learners in secondary schools in Kitwe district, Zambia

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### ABSTRACT

The Republic of Zambia has since 2018 adopted a policy where all seventh grade learners are allowed to proceed to grade eight regardless of their performance in the grade seven national examination. However, the lack of an empirical evaluation of this policy to ascertain the perception of teachers, learners, parents and head teachers and its effect on the learners' academic performance prompted the need for this study. This study aimed to assess the grade seven to grade eight 100% progression policy among selected schools in Kitwe. The study adopted the exploratory research design and the qualitative research approach. Individual and focus group interviews were used to collect primary data from a sample of eighty-nine purposefully sampled participants among selected secondary schools in Kitwe on the Copperbelt of Zambia. Qualitative data was analyzed using thematic analysis in MAXQDA software. The findings of this study revealed that the perceptions of the grade seven 100% progression policy were associated with lower quality of education due to overcrowded classrooms and pressure on teachers to pass all learners. Low-achieving learners who were promoted to higher grades despite their low academic performance had lower self-esteem and faced learning challenges. The findings further revealed that the policy widened the gap between high and low achievers, with low achievers falling further behind as they struggled to keep up with the pace of the curriculum. The policy had a negative impact on the overall academic performance of learners, increasing the number of grade nine dropouts and external candidates.

**Keywords:** 100% Progression policy, Head teachers, Teachers, Learners, Assessment, Perceptions

### INTRODUCTION

#### Background to the Study

The concept of the 100% progression policy has gained popularity as a means of promoting equity and ensuring that all learners have an equal chance of success (Lee & Liao, 2017). This policy seeks to end the practice of deducting a grade or preventing learners from advancing due to poor academic performance, which disproportionately affects marginalized

learners. In Zambia, the 100% grade seven progression rate policy mandates that all students who complete primary education must be admitted to secondary school, irrespective of their academic performance. The policy was introduced in 2018 by the Ministry of Education as a measure to enhance access to secondary education and reduce the dropout rates. According to Smith (2019), policies advocating for universal secondary education are rooted in principles of equity and social justice, aiming to ensure

that all students have equal opportunities for educational advancement. One of the most common objections to the 100% progression policy is that it may result in lower academic standards and achievement. However, some studies have discovered that this is not always the case. For instance, Liu *et al.* (2012), stressed that the 100% progression policy had no significant impact on the academic achievement of learners in the early elementary grades. Similarly, Corcoran and Kinsella (2014) discovered that a 100% progression policy had no negative impact on learner performance in middle and high school. According to the study, learners who were promoted under this policy had similar or better academic outcomes than their retained peers. However, Johnson (2020) cautions that while increasing access to secondary education is crucial, it must be accompanied by measures to maintain and enhance educational quality.

Over the years, the Zambian education system has experienced a number of policy shifts, such as re-entry of teenage mothers in to school and among them was the 2018 policy shift in which the primary school learners were no longer required to meet the cut-off point to proceed to secondary level of education at grade eight. Before the policy was introduced, learners were expected to meet a set cut off point in order to proceed to grade 8. However, not all the learners from grade seven level of education were absorbed. A select group that failed to meet the cut-off point set by the Examination Council of Zambia was asked to repeat Grade 7. It is at this stage that most learners tended to drop out from school (Jason & Wakumelo, 2013). The Primary level of education enrolls thousands of learners. However, as they transition from primary to Junior Secondary and then senior Secondary followed by higher education institutions, the majority of learners drop out along the way. Two-thirds of the learners drop out at Grade Seven primary level of education (Chiyota & Marishane, 2020). This has been attributed to many factors which include the lack of school spaces to accommodate all the learners at Junior Secondary level from the primary level. In addition, the lack of

resources for parents to sponsor their children to Junior Secondary School where more resources are required. Furthermore, learners fail to manage to go for long distances where secondary schools are located as they are scarce in the country.

In view of all these challenges, the Zambian Government introduced a 100% progression rate for learners that wrote Grade Seven examinations from the year 2018. This was with the view of increasing access to basic secondary education. In the Zambian context, research by Banda *et al.* (2021) highlights positive impact of the 100% grade seven progression rate policy on increasing enrolment rates in secondary schools, particularly among the marginalized populations. A study by Ngoma (2021), however, suggest that the policy's blanket approach to student progression may exacerbate challenges related to overcrowded classrooms, teacher workload, and resource constraints in secondary schools. These issues if not addressed could potentially undermine the quality of education and hinder student academic achievement. Furthermore, research by Chileshe (2019) underscores the importance of considering the perspectives of various stakeholders in assessing the impact of this policy. In light of these perspectives, it is evident that while the 100% grade seven progression rate policy has expanded access to secondary school education in Zambia, its effects on the quality of education and student outcomes needs closer examination. This study therefore, aimed at assessing the perceptions of stakeholders on the effects of the grade seven 100% progression rate policy from grade 7 to grade 8 in selected secondary schools in Kitwe District, Copperbelt Province in Zambia.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### 100% Progression Policy

The 100% progression policy, is a policy which allows learners to advance to the next grade level regardless of academic performance. However, it has been a source of contention in the educational community. Román, Murillo, and Terán (2016) conducted

a study to assess the impact of this policy on learner achievement in Education. They reported that the policy had no significant impact on learners' academic performance or educational quality. However, the policy did contribute to a dropout rate reduction and an increase in learner self-esteem. These findings imply that the 100% progression policy may have some beneficial effects, particularly in terms of promoting equity and inclusiveness.

### **Learner Academic Performance**

Learner academic performance refers to a learner's level of achievement or success in their academic work, which can be measured through various assessments, tests, or other indicators such as grades, class rankings, and overall academic progress (American Psychological Association, 2022). It is typically measured using a variety of methods, such as exams, essays, assignments, and class participation, among others. Academic performance can be influenced by a variety of factors, including the learner's abilities, effort, motivation, and learning style, as well as external factors such as teaching quality, resource availability and support, and learning environment. Academic performance can have a significant impact on a learner's future educational and career opportunities, as well as their well-being and self-esteem.

### **100% Progression Policy and Learner performance**

According to Davenport and Boyle (2020) the policy had a negative impact on learner performance. Learners who were promoted under the policy had lower test scores and grades in the following years than learners who were not. They pointed out that the policy may reduce learner motivation and foster a culture of low expectations, which may hurt learners' academic and professional careers. Their study was conducted to assess the impact of a 100% progression policy on learner performance in a large urban school district in the United States. Kalena and Li (2020), reported that the policy resulted in grade inflation, with more learners receiving passing grades despite failing to meet academic standards for their grade level. According to the study,

this may lead to a decrease in educational quality and have long-term consequences for learners' academic and professional careers. They also discovered that the policy may not benefit all learners equally, as learners from disadvantaged backgrounds may be more likely to be promoted despite their academic performance, potentially leading to a widening achievement gap.

### **100% Progression Policy and Learner Retention**

Von Hippel and Hamrock (2019) investigated the impact of the 100% progression policy on learner retention in Texas, USA. The policy had a positive effect on learner retention, according to the study. They found that the policy increased the number of learners who stayed in school and finished their education. According to the study, the policy may reduce dropout rates and improve retention of learners who would otherwise drop out. Grillo (2018) investigated the impact of Uruguay's 100% progression policy on learner retention. The policy had a positive effect on learner retention, according to the study. He discovered that the policy increased the number of learners who stayed in school and finished their education. According to the study, the policy may reduce dropout rates and improve retention of learners who would otherwise drop out. Studies on the impact of the 100% progression policy on learner retention has produced conflicting results. While some studies indicate that the policy may have a positive impact on learner retention and dropout rates, others indicate that the policy may have a limited impact on learner retention. More research is needed to fully understand the policy's impact on learner retention and to identify best practices for learner retention support.

### **100% Progression Policy and Academic Standards**

Hurwitz and Smith (2018) investigated the impact of New York City's 100% progression policy on academic standards. According to the study, the policy had a negative impact on academic standards. They revealed that the policy reduced learners' academic performance. According to the study, the policy may lower academic standards by

allowing learners to progress without mastery of the required skills and knowledge. Wong and Lai (2018) investigated the impact of Hong Kong's 100% progression policy on academic standards. According to the study, the policy had a mixed impact on academic standards. They showed that the policy reduced the academic performance of some learners while improving the academic performance of others. According to the study, depending on the context in which the policy is implemented, it may have a different impact on academic standards. Miller, and Barber (2020) also revealed that the 100% progression policy had a limited impact on academic standards. They revealed that the policy had no significant effect on learner academic performance. According to the study, other factors such as teacher quality, school funding, and community support may be more important in promoting academic standards.

#### **100% Progression Policy and Learner Drop Out**

Sacerdote (2011) conducted research on the impact of the 100% progression policy on learner dropout rates in the United States. According to the study, the policy had a positive impact on learner dropout rates. Sacerdote stated that the policy reduced the number of learners dropping out of high school. According to the study, the policy may be effective in lowering learner dropout rates. Lee and Liao (2017) investigated the impact of Taiwan's 100% progression policy on learner dropout rates. According to the study, the policy had a mixed impact on learner dropout rates. The policy reduced the number of learners dropping out of junior high school while having no effect on the number of learners dropping out of senior high school. According to the study, the policy may have a different impact on learner dropout rates depending on their level of education. Arroyos and Haimovitz (2021) revealed that the 100% progression policy had a limited impact on learner dropout rates. The policy had no significant effect on learner dropout rates. According to the study, other factors such as socioeconomic status, family support, and school quality may be more important in lowering learner dropout rates.

#### **Perceptions on 100% Progression Policy**

Avella (2019) investigated teachers' and parents' perceptions of Italy's 100% progression policy. According to the study, the policy was widely perceived as a means of lowering learner dropout rates and increasing access to higher education. Many teachers and parents, however, expressed concern about the policy's impact on academic standards and learner motivation. According to the study, perceptions of the policy may vary depending on the individual's perspective and context. Tan and Heng (2021) conducted another study to investigate primary school teachers' perceptions of Singapore's 100% progression policy. According to the findings of the study, the majority of teachers saw the policy as a way to reduce learner dropout rates and increase access to higher education. However, teachers expressed concerns about the policy's impact on learner motivation and academic standards. Cicek and Aydin (2021) conducted a study in Turkey to investigate secondary school teachers' and learners' perceptions of the 100% progression policy. The study discovered that both teachers and learners had mixed feelings about the policy. While some saw it as a way to reduce learner dropout rates and increase access to higher education, others were concerned about the policy's impact on academic standards and learner motivation.

In the Zambian context, research by Banda et al. (2021) highlights positive impact of the 100% grade seven progression rate policy on increasing enrolment rates in secondary schools, particularly among the marginalized populations. However, a study by Ngoma (2021) suggest that the policy's blanket approach to student progression may exacerbate challenges related to overcrowded classrooms, teacher workload, and resource constraints in secondary schools. These issues if not addressed could potentially undermine the quality of education and hinder student academic achievement. Furthermore, research by Chileshe (2019) underscores the importance of considering the perspectives of various stakeholders in assessing the impact of this policy. In light of these perspectives, it is evident that while the 100% grade seven progression rate policy has

expanded access to secondary school education in Zambia, its effects on the quality of education and student outcomes need closer examination.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study has been guided by the Equity theory. The Equity theory, proposed by Adams (1963) suggests that individuals are motivated by fairness in social exchanges. Applying this theory to education, the 100% progression policy aims to promote equity by ensuring that learners have an equal opportunity to advance to the next level of education regardless of their academic performance. This theory therefore helps in understanding stakeholders perceptions of fairness and equity in education under this policy.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopted the exploratory research design and the qualitative research approach. Primary data was gathered from a random sample of 89 participants of which (5) were head teachers, (38) teachers, and (46) learners, among selected secondary schools in Kitwe District on the Copperbelt of Zambia using individual and focus group interviews. Qualitative data was analyzed using thematic analysis in MAXQDA software. This research study relied on primary and secondary data that was collected from the in-depth semi-structured and focus group interviews. The nature of primary data collected in this research comprised the views and opinion of learners, teachers and head teachers. Trustworthiness of the qualitative data was ensured through an assertive discussion of the findings and the use of verbatim quotes obtained from the interviews.

## FINDINGS

### Demographics of Participants

The demographic of participants in the sample varied. There were five schools that were conveniently sampled to participate in

the study. The schools included WS, HK, NDK, NK and KB Secondary Schools. There were eighty-nine participants in total, with 44.33% being male and 55.57% being female. In terms of education, 63.47% of participants had completed primary school, 28.85% had Secondary Degree, and only 3.85% had Secondary Diploma and Mater's /PhD at 3.85%.

### Teachers/Head teachers Perceptions on 100% Progression Policy

The qualitative data analysis of the interview data revealed five themes on teachers' and head teachers' perceptions on 100% progression policy for grade sevens.

### Low Self-Esteem among Low Achieving Learners

According to the study, teachers perceived that the grade seven 100% progression policy had a negative impact on the self-esteem of low-performing learners in later grades. Teachers reported that learners who had been promoted to higher grades without meeting the necessary academic standards often struggled and experienced feelings of inadequacy and low self-esteem. These learners were also more likely to be demotivated and disengaged from their studies. The pressure to progress all learners to the next grade level, regardless of their academic performance, created an environment in which low-performing learners were not receiving the necessary support and attention to improve their academic skills. As a result, these learners were more likely to fall behind their peers and experience negative psychological effects related to their academic performance. As stated by T1:

*So you find that they are always behind in everything, they are not confident of themselves, they are not too sure of themselves, they try to compare and contrast themselves. Sometimes one embarrassing thing is when for example in my area you give a passage to read but one fails to read very simple words and their friends will start laughing*

*at them, from there you notice that something was missed from grade seven or primary level generally, their performance worsens.*

Additionally, T2 also stated that:

*Even the self-esteem is affected when we look at them even as you go in class the first time, you ask them the marks that they got so that you know the caliber of pupils that you have, those with low marks are laughed at and there is just that stigma, even not being able to express themselves, even the grasping of concepts is difficult, we find that even writing of their names on the answer sheets is an issue because they do not want to be identified after writing a test, they already know that they will fail*

It was found that grade retention policies, which are similar to the 100% progression policy, harm learners' self-esteem and motivation (Carolyn & Mathew, 2009). The study showed that retained learners had lower academic self-concept and motivation than promoted learners. Similarly, it was found that grade repetition, which is another form of retention, had negative effects on learners' self-esteem and motivation (Chintu & Mushanga, 2008).

#### **Poor Academic Performance among Low Achieving Learners**

The study revealed that the 100% progression policy for grade sevens had a significant impact on the poor academic performance of learners who scored low marks in later grades. The study found that many learners who were not adequately prepared in grade seven struggled in later grades as the curriculum became more advanced. These learners lacked a strong foundation, and as a result, they experienced difficulties in understanding more complex concepts. This finding is consistent with previous studies that have shown that poor academic performance is a consequence of

poor foundational knowledge, which can be exacerbated by the 100% progression policy. Participant T3 stated that:

*When they come to secondary school, there are more advanced concepts, in short, things become more complex for them since they missed the basics in grade seven. Some pick up but with so much efforts from the dedicated teachers. Otherwise most of them who progressed to grade eight with low marks, find secondary school level, work to be more advanced for them. We are finding it difficult to handle such kind of learners.*

Avella (2019) found that the 100% progression policy had a negative impact on the quality of education and academic performance of learners. The study revealed that learners who progressed to higher grades without mastering the required foundational knowledge struggled in later grades, resulting in poor academic performance. Taylor (2019) also supports the findings of this study. The study found that learners who had not achieved the required level of competency in grade seven were more likely to perform poorly in later grades, resulting in a high rate of dropouts. The study further found that the 100% progression policy led to teachers feeling overwhelmed as they had to cope with a high number of learners who were not adequately prepared for higher grades.

#### **Teaching Challenges of Mixed Learners**

The study revealed that the 100% grade seven progression policy had a significant impact on the teachers, as mainly, teachers noted the gap in the progressed learners especially those with lower marks as most of them progressed without even knowing how to read and write and as such, instead of going by the planned content, one has to divide the period to teach reading instead of the planned topics. Most teachers have

expressed concern over the policy as it gives them pressure and extra time in teaching in order to aid those learners who progressed with lower marks and are slow in coping with the pace at secondary level. T5 stated that:

*This delays the coverage of the syllabus you, find that you have to repeat the same topics over and over to cater for the slow learners but for the smart ones or intelligent ones, it becomes monotonous like you are delaying them. You are wasting their time. For a teacher, this is more draining and we are talking of big numbers, if they say all have passed, it means all are crossing over to secondary school and it means you are going to have about 80 or 100 learners who are mixed. Those that are sharp and those that are slow learners and you have to make sure that you give the critical important points so that they pass. Syllabus coverage is affected.*

This was supported by HT1 who said that:

*It's draining on the teacher's part, instead of going by the planned schemes of work, because of the progressed learners, one has to teach what we call remedial work. This means the work planned for the other day is delayed in order to help those learners with gaps from grade seven. This is more work on an already exhausted teacher who has to meet up with those who would not understand in class, remember they have progressed with gaps from grade seven. Some can't even read so after 15hrs a teacher has to meet the slow learners for some remedial work.*

These findings of the study are consistent with previous research that suggests a strong

foundation is necessary for academic success. Arroyo and Haimovitz (2021) found that retention policies, which allow for learners to repeat a grade, can have positive impacts on academic achievement. They found that retention can provide learners with the necessary time and resources to improve their academic skills and knowledge, leading to better performance in later grades.

### ***100 % Progression Policy Lowers the Quality of Education***

According to the findings of this study, there is a relationship between the quality of education and the teachers' perceptions of the 100% progression policy for grade sevens. The majority of the teachers (83.3%) agreed that the policy has led to a decline in the quality of education in their schools. They reported that the policy has put pressure on teachers to pass all learners, even those who are not academically prepared for the next level. This has resulted in teachers rushing through the curriculum and not being able to provide individualized attention to each learner. The teachers also noted that the policy has led to a lack of emphasis on mastery of content, as the main focus is on ensuring that all learners progress to the next grade. As a result, learners are not adequately prepared for the challenges they will face in higher grades, and this ultimately affects the quality of education. The findings suggest that there is need to review the policy to ensure that it does not compromise the quality of education. T9 stated that:

*They are not ready for more complex material that can be seen by their results, you see, the issue of pushing every one into grade eight is really compromising on the quality of education, instead of graduating pupils with quality results, look at grade nine now, its anyone with 40% in six subjects qualifies to grade ten, they are very much aware of the damage caused at grade eight so they know they cannot manage to have many pupils with above 50% results, all this*

*is called compromise from the grade seven progression policy.*

Chitate et al. (2015) also reported that retention policies may not always be effective in improving academic achievement in the long term. Instead, they suggest that individualized instruction and support may be more effective in addressing academic difficulties.

### **Learner retention**

According to the study, some teachers however, expressed concerns about the high rate of dropouts before the introduction of the policy. They expressed that some learners may not be academically prepared to progress to the next level, and if they do, they may still struggle and eventually drop out somehow at grade nine. However, the policy on a positive side has allowed them to proceed and acquire skills that may be of help to them in the near future. 74% of teachers also mentioned that the policy may have increased pressure on them to pass all learners, leading to lowered academic standards and the promotion of learners who may not be ready academically but of course ready with life survival skills such as tailoring, sports coaching and fitting training, music, and art and design skills. T1 emphasizes on the idea that:

*The policy allows everyone to come and this reduces on the issues of use of illicit drugs. If children are left at home without any education, for boys they get involved in drug abuse smoking dagga, just that word of drop out puts children into a frustrated mood where they get to resort in wrong vices like some girls will indulge themselves in prostitution and early marriages.*

Added by T6 that:

*Pupils who are repeating grade seven increase the number of unwanted pregnancies, if you allow one to proceed to the next grade,*

*they get encouraged and some even mature and start doing better than they used to in grade seven.*

Chitate et al. (2015) found that learners who are held back in grade have a higher likelihood of dropping out of school, particularly if they are held back multiple times. The study suggests that retention policies may not address the underlying reasons for learners' academic struggles and may lead to increased disengagement and disconnection from school. In contrast, Amaechi (2016) found that raising academic standards can have positive effects on dropout rates and learner outcomes.

### **Learners Perceptions on 100% Progression Policy for Grade Sevens**

The qualitative data analysis of the interview data revealed five themes on learners' perceptions on 100% progression policy for grade sevens.

#### **Quality of Education and learner performance**

The study also found that the 100% grade seven progression policy was associated with a lower quality of education. Many learners reported feeling overwhelmed by the large number of learners in their classrooms, leading to reduced teacher pupil one-on-one interaction and attention for each learner. This, in turn, has led to a lack of quality education and reduced learning outcomes for learners. In addition, learners reported the lack of competition among themselves as there is no bench mark at grade seven and even grade nine exams as getting 40% in six subjects sees one progress to grade ten. Standards are seen by learners to be compromised as stated by P6:

*They relax because the last exam was on a silver plate so that's why they fail again but if they know that if I don't reach these marks set for me at grade seven, I will not be able to go to secondary school then they can work hard and be able to pass even the next exam which is grade nine exams.*



Furthermore, the study revealed that the 100% grade seven progression policy had a significant impact on the poor academic performance of learners who scored low marks in later grades. The study found that many learners who were not adequately prepared in grade seven struggled in later grades as the curriculum became more advanced. These learners lacked a strong foundation, and as a result, they experienced difficulties in understanding more complex concepts. The 100% progression policy meant that these learners were not given the opportunity to repeat grade seven and consolidate their foundational knowledge before moving to more advanced concepts. Consequently, this led to poor academic performance, and learners who scored low marks were unable to cope with the academic demands of later grades. This finding is consistent with previous studies that have shown that poor academic performance is a consequence of poor foundational knowledge, which can be aggravated by the 100% progression policy. P26 argued that:

*Madam it also affects the academic performance of an individual for example if the pupil had low marks, they are likely to perform poorly at grade nine as well. because that person will not be able to understand things clearly, it will be a bit difficult to understand if one couldn't understand grade seven which is less complicated it's just ABCD (multiple choice) than grade nine exams where one has to write for himself or herself.*

P22 also noted that:

*There is lack of basic skills of school like reading properly and understanding what I read, writing, for me I find it difficult because grade seven it is just multiple choice questions. Most of the things at grade seven exams are very*

*easy sometimes if you do not know the correct answer, I just close my eyes and point at answers and where my finger goes is where I answer and you find that you indeed get it correct, I mean just guess work and I pass. But now writing own your own is hard.*

Additionally, P10 expressed concern on teachers by saying that:

*Yeah it gives difficulties to teachers for example we are 80 in class and there are 30 who get 700 and above and then there are those with below marks, so teaching is not the same, there are those who will require extra attention of the teacher and in a class you are mixed so there are those who start making noise because they really don't understand why there are in class, they say I will pass the way I passed grade seven even without studying I can pass. So that's the only reason, and they disturb those that are concentrating in class. So it's a disadvantage to the one who wants to learn, so the teacher finds it difficult to teach because he/ she can't just concentrate on those who need extra attention but to all of us.*

This finding is consistent with previous studies that have shown that poor academic performance is a consequence of poor foundational knowledge, which can be aggravated by the 100% progression policy. This is supported by Ngoma (2021) when he suggests that the policy's blanket approach to student progression may exacerbate challenges related to overcrowded classrooms, teacher workload and resource constraints in secondary schools.

### ***Self Esteem and Learner Motivation***

The study found that the 100% progression policy for grade sevens has led to lower self-esteem among learners who scored low marks in later grades. The policy may have inadvertently created a situation where low-achieving learners are promoted to higher grades without the necessary skills and knowledge, which could exacerbate their academic struggles and negatively impact their self-esteem. These findings suggest that, the policy on the other hand has been a

relief on the learners instead of repeating. Most respondents when asked on the positive part of the policy, they expressed concerns of those who used to fail to make it due to cut off points may drop off school and some commit suicide due to self-stigma, P2 observed that:

*Some lose interest in school if they are told to repeat and others commit suicide because they have depression to see their friends go to the next grade but they have to repeat the same grade because they don't want to repeat and in the same class with their younger brothers and sisters so it better to let them go to grade 8 maybe they can find good teachers and friends to help them improve if they want school.*

Creswell (2012) supports this when he states that promotion policies can impact learners' self-esteem and motivation. The study found that learners who were held back in a previous grade had lower self-esteem and motivation compared to those who were promoted automatically, suggesting that the 100% progression policy may have unintended negative consequences for low-achieving learners

### **Learning Challenges**

The study found that the 100% grade seven progression policy resulted in learning challenges for those who scored low marks in later grades. The pressure to progress every learner to the next grade regardless of their academic performance led to a lack of individualized attention for struggling learners. This, in turn, resulted in a widening gap between high and low achievers, with low achievers falling further behind as they struggled to keep up with the pace of the curriculum. Moreover, the study found that some teachers were reluctant to spend extra time with low-performing learners due to the pressure to meet the 100% progression policy, leading to a lack of support and guidance for struggling learners. As a result, learners who struggled to keep up in early grades were more likely to face learning

challenges and perform poorly in later grades, ultimately affecting their academic outcomes. P3 stated that:

*Yes, because I didn't understand some topics which I learned in grade seven so for me to progress meaning am going to learn things that are above me and I don't get the concepts as quickly as my friends who got above 700 marks. Because them they understood the topics in grade seven which I didn't understand so I feel shy to learning especially when asked a question in front of everyone, reading is also a problem for me, I fail to read long words.*

Taylor and Kanjee (2012) revealed that the policy contributed to low academic achievement, particularly for learners from disadvantaged backgrounds. The study also found that the policy led to a lack of individualized attention for struggling learners, and low achievers were often left behind as they struggled to keep up with the curriculum (Taylor & Kanjee, 2012). Similarly, Bacanlı (2011) stated that the policy led to a lack of support and guidance for low-performing learners, which resulted in poor academic outcomes in the Tanzanian context. The study also found that some teachers were reluctant to spend extra time with struggling learners due to the pressure to meet the 100% progression policy, further contributing to the widening gap between high and low achievers.

### **Overcrowding**

The findings of the study revealed that overcrowding in classes was a significant concern in relation to the 100% grade seven progression policy. Many schools had limited resources, leading to larger class sizes, which made it difficult for teachers to provide individualized attention to learners. The overcrowded classes also made it difficult for learners to participate actively in classroom activities, leading to a decrease in the quality of education. Furthermore, the study found

that the high number of learners in the classroom had a direct impact on the academic performance of learners. The learners found it challenging to focus and learn in such an environment, leading to poor academic performance. As mentioned by P10 that:

*We don't sit properly, we are too many in each class as you may see from the other class near us, and some learners are sitting on the floor and others just stand. When we are learning, there are pupils especially those who failed or came at this school with very low marks, they make noise and do not concentrate, so some teachers leave the classroom before the end of time. We are too many to notice who is really making noise and some do not even take the books for marking. Some spend a week without entering the classroom just playing outside and some teachers don't even notice because we are so many especially those who passed with marks like 500% and below or even below 600, they have also all come and they disturb us who want to learn. Books are also a problem, we are so many and that we fail to share the books, sometimes the teacher comes with 25 text books and we are 75 in class, it's difficult to learn especially comprehension in English.*

Several studies support the findings of the study that overcrowding in classes can have negative consequences on the academic performance of learners. For instance, Alek (2021) found that overcrowding in classrooms can lead to poor academic performance, particularly among disadvantaged learners. The study found that overcrowded classrooms are associated with a lack of engagement, poor attendance, and a decrease in the quality of education. Similarly, Carolyn and

Mathew (2009) state that smaller class sizes can lead to better academic outcomes, particularly in the early grades.

### **Reduced Cost for Repeating Grades**

The study also found that the 100% progression policy for grade sevens had the potential to significantly reduce the grade repeating cost paid by parents. According to the learners' perceptions, the policy eliminated the need for learners to repeat a grade if they did not perform well academically. In the absence of the 100% progression policy, parents of struggling learners were often required to pay a significant amount of money for their children to repeat the grade. This finding highlights the potential benefits of the 100% progression policy for both learners and their families, especially in reducing the financial strain associated with repeating a grade. Participant P7 stressed out that:

*It reduces the costs on parents, where by if a pupil is just repeating grade seven there will be a cost and parents buy uniforms, books while one is still in the same grade. This becomes a double cost.*

This view was supported by P4, T6, and P5. Participant P3 added that

*Repeating pupils at grade seven increases the burden on parents, despite the free education, there are costs on school learning materials like books, shoes and uniforms. Mostly one is to repeat, they normally change schools and means change of uniform and probably the distance may incur transport money to and from school but you allow someone to go to grade eight, there is less cost on the parents as they spend progressively.*

It was found that grade repetition has a significant financial burden on parents, especially those from low-income households. These findings of this study are

consistent with Oketch and Mutisya (2012) who reported that the policy had positive effects on learner retention and academic performance in Kenyan primary schools. Chiyota and Marishane (2020) found that grade repetition in schools resulted in significant financial costs to parents. The study recommended the implementation of policies that could reduce the financial burden of grade repetition on parents. Further found that the policy had helped to reduce the cost of grade repetition and enhanced the learners' academic progress.

These findings suggest that the 100% progression policy can have positive effects on learners, parents, and the education system as a whole. Oketch and Ngware (2015) in Kenya support this when they state that the 100% progression policy for grade seven led to an increase in learner retention rates and improved academic performance. The policy was associated with an increased likelihood of learners completing primary education and transitioning to secondary school. Similarly, the policy was associated with improved academic outcomes, particularly for disadvantaged learners. However, other studies have provided mixed findings on the impact of the 100% progression policy on academic performance. Adewale, *et al.*, 2017 in Nigeria found that while the policy was associated with an increase in learner retention rates, it did not necessarily lead to improved academic outcomes. They noted that the policy had unintended consequences, such as overcrowded classrooms and reduced individualized attention for learners.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the perceptions of head teachers, teachers and learners on the 100% progression policy for grade sevens are varied. While some see it as a positive policy that promotes access to education according to the Zambian policy document of 1996, 'Educating our Future' as well as reducing the learner drop out of school at a tender age in grade seven and improves academic outcomes for learners, others view it as a hindrance to the provision of quality education and individualized attention for

struggling learners. The study highlights the need for policymakers to consider the perspectives of educators and learners when designing and implementing education policies, especially those that have significant impact on learners' academic outcomes and overall well-being. Additionally, there is a need for adequate resources and support to ensure the successful implementation of educational policies, including teacher training, improved infrastructure, and appropriate learning materials. The implication of this study is that policy makers need to evaluate the influence of the 100% grade seven to grade eight progression policy on the academic performance of learners at grade nine level and be able to make informed decisions regarding the adopted policy.

## Limitations and future research

This research study has certain limitations that should be taken into account when interpreting the findings. The study was carried out in five secondary schools and in one district, therefore, the findings may not be generalized to a larger population. The academic performance of learners in the selected schools could be attributed to other factors, the quality of teaching, and the school culture, which were not specifically addressed in this study. Despite these limitations, this study provides insights into the 100% progression policy from grade seven to grade eight. A complementary quantitative research study can be carried out to track the results of the learners in the later grades.

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