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Progression Policy, Learner Behavior, and Teacher Interventions: An Attribution Theory Perspective

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Abstract. Learner behaviour in the classroom is central to teachers' ability to achieve instructional objectives and sustain a productive learning environment. However, classroom management practices are increasingly shaped by education policy reforms, including South Africa's Progression Policy. Grounded in attribution theory, this study explored teachers' perceptions of the Progression Policy's influence on learners' behaviour and examined strategies to address related behavioural challenges. Guided by an interpretivist paradigm, the study employed a qualitative multiple-case study design. Data was generated through a focus group discussion with seven purposively selected teachers from two quintile three secondary schools in the Free State Province. The findings indicate that teachers commonly attribute the Progression Policy to learner disengagement, perceived indolence, confrontational attitudes, and low self-esteem, which collectively undermine the culture of teaching and learning. By applying attribution theory, the study provides interpretive insight into how teachers' causal explanations of learner behaviour may inform classroom responses and intervention practices. The findings suggest potential policy-relevant considerations, including the need to account for the number of progressed learners when reflecting on teacher allocation and departmental support. These findings highlight the need for discussions about the Progression Policy that reflect the realities teachers face in their classrooms.

Keywords: Attribution to behaviour; Classroom Management; Progression Policy; Progressed Learners; Indiscipline; Disruptive Behavior

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1. Introduction

Despite the transformative intent of the Progression Policy (PP), research evidence regarding its classroom-level implications remains fragmented and conceptually underdeveloped. Existing studies have primarily examined the policy in relation to learner academic performance (Nkosi & Adebayo, 2021; Dube, 2025), implementation challenges (Mogale & Modipane, 2021), and learner psychosocial outcomes such as self-esteem (Khobe, 2021). Although Mdhluli (2025) examines the combined implications of the PP and the Multiple Examination Opportunity Policy, with particular attention to assessment practices and learner progression pathways, the analysis remains largely policy oriented. Consequently, learner behaviour continues to be framed as an outcome of structural policy arrangements rather than as a dynamic, socially constructed phenomenon mediated through teachers' classroom interpretations and practices.

A growing body of literature highlights behavioural challenges among PLs, including disengagement, resistance to authority, and classroom disruption (Hlasa & Gcelu, 2024; Letuma & Mdogana-Zide, 2024). These behaviours are frequently framed as learner deficits that undermine teaching and learning. However, alternative studies problematise this deficit-oriented framing by suggesting that learner behaviour may be a response to stigmatisation, exclusionary practices, and limited emotional support within school contexts (Letuma, 2025; Mogale & Malatji, 2022). This divergence reveals an unresolved tension in literature: while some studies locate behavioural challenges within learners themselves, others point to the relational and contextual dimensions of behaviour shaped by teacher practices and institutional conditions.

Notably absent from this body of work is a theoretically grounded examination of how teachers make sense of learner behaviour under the PP and how these sense-making processes inform their intervention strategies. Although teachers are central actors in policy enactment and classroom management, their causal explanations of learner behaviour, whether attributed to policy design, learner motivation, ability, or contextual constraints, remain underexplored. Without such an analysis, existing research offers limited insight into why particular intervention practices are adopted and how these practices may inadvertently reinforce behavioural challenges.

This gap is significant because attribution processes influence not only teachers' expectations and emotional responses but also the nature of disciplinary and support strategies implemented in classrooms. Understanding teachers' attributional interpretations is therefore essential for explaining variations in intervention practices and for identifying how policy intentions are translated into everyday pedagogical decisions.

Against this backdrop, the present study explores teachers' perceptions of the Progression Policy's influence on learners' behaviour. It examines how these perceptions shape intervention strategies in secondary schools in the Free State Province. Grounded in attribution theory, the study seeks to move beyond descriptive accounts of policy impact by offering a conceptual analysis of teachers'

causal explanations of learner behaviour. By foregrounding teachers' perspectives, the study contributes to an understanding of policy enactment and classroom management under the PP. The following research questions guided the study: How does the progression policy influence learners' behaviour in schools? How can this influence be addressed?

2. Literature Review

This literature review examines existing research on South Africa's PP to synthesize evidence on its academic, behavioural, and systemic consequences, and to identify conceptual gaps that justify the present study. Rather than presenting fragmented thematic summaries, the review integrates prior findings to demonstrate how the challenges associated with the PP are interconnected and how teachers' interpretations of learner behaviour are central to policy enactment. Attribution theory provides the conceptual framework for analyzing how learner behaviour and academic difficulties are explained in literature and how these explanations shape responses within schools.

2.1 Problems Associated with Progression Policy

Research indicates that implementing the PP has produced complex, often unintended consequences in South African secondary schools. A dominant concern across studies is that progressing learners without sufficient mastery of prior content increases academic heterogeneity in higher grades, placing considerable strain on teaching and learning processes (Van der Berg et al., 2021). Several studies associate the PP with declining academic performance, particularly at the Grade 12 level, where progressed learners (PL) are disproportionately represented among underperforming cohorts (Grossen et al., 2017; Mogale & Malatji, 2022; Nkosi & Adebayo, 2021). These findings suggest that while progression may prevent early dropouts, it does not necessarily ensure academic success.

Beyond academic outcomes, research highlights significant psychosocial consequences for PLs. Khobe (2021) found that PLs frequently experience diminished self-esteem, feelings of inadequacy, humiliation, and emotional distress, often exacerbated by negative labelling and public identification by teachers. Nkosi and Adebayo (2021) similarly report that learners who struggle academically tend to internalise failure, leading to low confidence and eventual disengagement from schooling. From an attributional perspective, these studies implicitly reflect internal and stable attributions of learner failure, which are associated with reduced motivation and learned helplessness (Chataa & Nkengbeza, 2019).

At the systemic level, enrolment and repetition patterns further illustrate the structural pressures linked to the PP. Analyses of administrative data reveal pronounced enrolment bulges in Grades 4 and 10, indicating high repetition rates at key transition points (Van der Berg et al., 2019a, 2021). Despite policy restrictions on repetition, repetition rates remain persistently high, particularly in Quintile 1-3 schools serving low-income communities (Van der Berg et al., 2021; Van Wyk et al., 2017). Only approximately 58% of learners are in the correct grade

by age 14, and over-age enrolment is markedly higher in poorer schools than in more affluent ones (Van der Berg et al., 2021). These disparities highlight how socioeconomic inequality intersects with policy implementation to shape learner trajectories (Department of Basic Education [DBE], 2023; Van der Berg, 2019b).

While literature documents these academic, emotional, and structural challenges in detail, it reveals significant conceptual tensions. Some studies frame learner difficulties primarily as deficits in effort, ability, or motivation (Brahmbhatt, 2020; Hlasa, 2022), implying internal and controllable attributions of failure. Others emphasise contextual and policy-related constraints, including inadequate support structures, curriculum overload, and systemic inequality (Khantsi et al., 2024; Mogale & Modipane, 2021; Mogale & Malatji, 2022). This divergence suggests that learner behaviour and performance under the PP are interpreted through competing attributed lenses, yet these processes are rarely explicitly examined.

Teachers emerge as central actors in mediating the effects of the PP, yet their role is often treated descriptively rather than analytically. Policy guidelines require schools and teachers to provide targeted academic and psychosocial support to PLs (DBE, 2017). However, empirical evidence indicates that such backing is frequently insufficient, inconsistently implemented, or designed without meaningful PL input (Nyathi, 2021; Mogale & Malatji, 2022). Teachers' resistance to progression is commonly linked to perceptions that learners are promoted before they are academically ready, increasing instructional difficulty (Nkosi & Adebayo, 2021; Van der Berg et al., 2021). From an attribution theory perspective, these perceptions reflect attributions that locate responsibility for failure within learners, which may limit teachers' willingness to adopt supportive intervention strategies.

Although some scholars attribute challenges in PP implementation to limited parental involvement (Mogale & Modipane, 2021), this explanation overlooks contextual realities in many South African communities, where parental participation in schooling is constrained by socioeconomic conditions (Kitching et al., 2019; Naidoo, 2021). Consequently, teachers often become the primary agents responsible for interpreting policy, responding to learner behaviour, and managing the consequences of PP within classrooms.

Taken together, the literature demonstrates that the challenges associated with the PP are not merely technical or administrative but are profoundly shaped by how learner behaviour and performance are interpreted at the classroom level. While existing studies provide valuable descriptive accounts of academic outcomes, psychosocial effects, and systemic patterns, they offer limited insight into how teachers' causal explanations of learner behaviour influence intervention practices. This gap is significant, as attribution theory suggests that teachers' beliefs about the causes, stability, and controllability of learner behaviour directly shape their expectations, disciplinary responses, and support strategies.

2.2 Theoretical Framework. Attribution Theory

This study is grounded in attribution theory, which explains how individuals interpret the causes of behaviour and outcomes, particularly in contexts of academic difficulty and behavioural challenge (Heider, 1958, cited in McLeod, 2023). Attribution theory is especially relevant in educational settings because teachers' causal explanations of learner behaviour shape their emotional responses, expectations of change, and subsequent instructional and disciplinary decisions.

In education, attribution theory has been most systematically developed through Weiner's attribution-based theory of motivation (Weiner, 2010). Weiner conceptualizes causal explanations along three interrelated dimensions: locus of causality (internal or external), stability (stable or unstable), and controllability (controllable or uncontrollable). These dimensions provide a parsimonious analytical structure for understanding why similar learner behaviors may elicit markedly different teacher responses and have been widely validated across applied contexts (Martinko & Mackey, 2019).

Empirical classroom-based studies demonstrate the practical relevance of this framework. Research shows that teachers commonly attribute learner misbehavior to student-related or out-of-school factors, and that these attributes are systematically associated with the management strategies they adopt (Kulinna, 2008). More recent evidence further indicates that teachers' attributional interpretations influence whether responses to challenging behavior are supportive and adaptive or reactive and exclusionary (Patnaik & Subban, 2023). Together, these studies confirm Weiner's proposition that teachers' responses to learner behavior are mediated by attributional reasoning rather than by behavior alone.

In this study, attribution theory is operationalized to guide both the development of the research instrument and the data analysis within the context of the PP. The PP represents a salient structural condition that teachers may perceive as an external and stable influence on learner performance, disengagement, and behavior. Attribution theory, therefore, provides a suitable framework for examining how teachers assign responsibility for learner behavior within this policy context.

The attributional dimensions of locus, stability, and controllability directly informed the design of the semi-structured interview questions, which were constructed to elicit teachers' causal explanations for learner disengagement, disruptive behaviour, and academic difficulty among progressed learners, as well as their perceptions of responsibility and capacity for change. This approach reflects attribution-based research emphasizing the importance of accessing teachers' causal beliefs to understand their pedagogical and behavioural responses (Kulinna, 2008; Patnaik & Subban, 2023).

During data analysis, teachers' responses were coded according to attributional categories derived from Weiner's framework. Attributions were analysed in terms of whether causes were framed as internal or external, stable or unstable, and controllable or uncontrollable, enabling systematic examination of how attributional patterns were associated with classroom management practices and intervention decisions under the PP.

By foregrounding the operationalisation of attribution theory in both data generation and analysis, the study moves beyond a descriptive use of the framework. Instead, it demonstrates how teachers' causal interpretations of learner behaviour function as a mediating mechanism between policy conditions and classroom practice, making attribution theory particularly well-suited to this qualitative, interpretivist inquiry.

3. Methodology

3.1 Paradigm and Approach

This study was located within an interpretive paradigm and adopted a qualitative research approach. The interpretive stance was appropriate as it enabled an in-depth understanding of teachers' subjective meanings and interpretations of learner behavior under the PP (Leedy et al., 2019). Through this approach, the study sought to explore how teachers constructed explanations for learner behavior within their specific school contexts.

3.2 Research Design

A multiple-case study design was employed as the mode of inquiry, with two quintile three schools serving as research sites. Quintile one to three schools in South Africa are non-fee-paying institutions that provide learners with basic educational resources, including stationery and meals. The selection of three quintile schools was informed by evidence that such schools experience high levels of grade repetition and enroll learners who are older than the age-appropriate cohort (Van der Berg et al., 2019b). These characteristics made the sites particularly relevant for examining the influence of the Progression Policy on learner behavior.

3.3 Data Collection Processes

Data were generated through a focus group discussion (FGD) involving seven purposively selected post-level one teachers from the two schools in the Motheo District of the Free State Province, South Africa. The FGD was chosen for its interactive nature, which enabled participants to engage with one another's views, clarify meanings, and collectively reflect on shared experiences. Open-ended questions guided the discussion, allowing participants to respond freely and elaborate on their perspectives. Through probing and clarification, rich and in-depth data were generated. Data saturation was reached as similar issues and themes recurred during the discussion, making additional data-collection methods unnecessary.

3.4 Data Analysis

The data were analyzed thematically following Braun and Clarke's (2006) reflexive thematic analysis, with attribution theory serving as the guiding

analytical lens. After transcription, the researchers familiarized themselves with the data through repeated listening to audio recordings and careful reading of transcripts. Initial codes were generated inductively but were theoretically sensitized by attribution theory, particularly the dimensions of internal versus external causality, stability, and controllability.

Codes were compared across participants and research sites to identify patterns of meaning. Related codes were clustered to construct themes that reflected teachers' attributional explanations of learner behaviour. For example, codes associated with lack of effort and disengagement were synthesized into the theme Perceived indolence. In contrast, codes related to learner resistance and policy awareness informed the theme Confrontational attitudes. The analysis moved beyond description to interpretation, linking teachers' causal explanations of behaviour to their suggested intervention strategies.

3.5 Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was ensured through strategies addressing credibility, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was enhanced through triangulation, achieved by engaging multiple participants in the FGD and obtaining diverse perspectives on the same phenomenon (Denzin, 2012). Member checking was conducted during the discussion to clarify meanings, and direct quotations were used to ensure that findings were grounded in participants' voices.

Dependability was supported by providing a clear, transparent description of the research process, including the research design, participant selection, data collection procedures, and analytical steps. The inclusion of detailed tables outlining the research sites and participants' biographic information further strengthened methodological transparency. Confirmability was ensured by maintaining an audit trail that documented the progression from data collection to theme development, thereby demonstrating that the findings emerged from the data rather than researcher bias.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Free State Department of Education and the University of the Free State Ethics Committee (Ethical clearance number: UFS-HSD2022/1662/22). Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured by using pseudonyms for both participants and research sites. The participants and research sites in this paper are represented by pseudonyms, as follows:

The two research sites, School A and School B

Participants : Participant 1 – Participant 7 (P1 – P7)

Tables 1 and 2 below represent the demographic details of the research sites and the participants.

Table 1: Details of the research sites

Name of school	Number of principals	Number of deputy principals	Number of departmental heads	Number of teachers	Number of learners	Quintile ranking
School A	1	2	5	35	1258	3
School B	1	2	6	42	1294	3

Table 1 presents key details of the two research sites, School A and School B. Both schools have one principal and two deputy principals, indicating similar leadership structures. School A has five departmental heads and 35 teachers, while School B has six departmental heads and 42 teachers. In terms of learner enrolment, School A has 1,258 learners, and School B has 1,294 learners, showing comparable school sizes. Both schools are classified as Quintile 3 institutions, which reflects similar socio-economic contexts. Overall, the table highlights that the two schools are broadly comparable in leadership, staffing, learner population, and quintile ranking.

Table 2: Participants' biographic details

Name	School	Gender	Teaching experience	Highest qualification
P1	A	F	10	B.Ed.
P2	A	F	15	B.Ed. Honours
P3	A	M	16	ACE
P4	A	M	1	B.Ed.
P5	B	M	3	BSc (PGCE)
P6	B	M	3	B.Ed.
P7	B	M	3	B.Ed.

Keys: B.Ed.-Bachelor of Education, ACE-Advanced Certificate in Education, PGCE-Postgraduate Certificate in Education, BSc-Bachelor of Science

Table 2 summarises the biographic details of the seven participants involved in the study. The participants were drawn from two schools: four from School A and three from School B. The group comprises both male and female teachers, although male participants are in the majority. Teaching experience among participants ranges from 1 to 16 years, indicating a mix of novice and experienced teachers. In terms of qualifications, most participants hold a Bachelor of Education, with others possessing a B.Ed. Honours, Advanced Certificate in Education, Postgraduate Certificate in Education, or a Bachelor of Science with PGCE. Overall, the table reflects a diverse sample across gender, experience, and academic qualifications.

4. Findings

The themes presented below were generated through a thematic analysis informed by Attribution Theory, particularly distinctions between internal and external causal explanations of behaviour. During analysis, participants' accounts were coded according to whether teachers attributed learner behaviour to internal factors (e.g., effort, attitude, motivation, self-esteem) or to external and contextual conditions (e.g., policy structures, resource constraints, curriculum demands).

The five themes reflect dominant attributional patterns in teachers' explanations of how the Progression Policy influences learner behaviour and how such behaviour might be mitigated.

4.1 Theme 1: Perceived indolence as a factor that influences learners' behaviour

The participants described the Progression Policy as influencing learner behaviour in ways they interpreted as promoting indolence, which they perceived as gradually becoming normalised within the school culture. Teachers attributed this perceived shift not only to PLs but also to its influence on learners previously viewed as committed, suggesting that exposure to this context altered effort and engagement patterns. A participant from School B shared as follows:

"I think the Progression Policy makes learners lazy. They appear to have been forced to come to school. They just do not seem ready, because they are used to being pushed from one grade to another and make no effort at all." (P7)

From School A, the participant revealed that learners copied each other's behaviour to the detriment of the teaching and learning process:

"Even those learners you know could do everything to please you by doing their work correctly, they begin to copy the behaviour, and suddenly, the culture of learning is non-existent in the classroom." (P1)

Another participant from School A echoed P1's sentiments. They revealed that when offered extra classes, the progressed learners abdicate their school attendance to cope with being labelled as progressed learners. This was their view:

"Even when you try remedial work, such as sacrificing and coming for Saturday classes, those Progressed Learners you need most do not bother to come." (P4)

Participants attributed the culture of indolence as a critical factor of disruptive behaviour in schools. They indicated that PLs struggle academically, so they conceal their limitations by being disruptive to prevent others from succeeding. From School A, another participant revealed that progressed learners become disruptive in class to prevent others from succeeding. She shared:

"Remember, they already have limitations and hide that by being unruly in class, so that not everyone gets a chance to succeed." (P1)

Data reveal that progressed learners exhibited a particular behaviour as a strategic way to cope with being labelled as such. This phenomenon is synonymous with being relegated to failure for these learners. To avoid further embarrassment, they display behaviours that disrupt the teaching and learning process, creating additional challenges in implementing the PP for these learners. Although there are rules and regulations to implement the PP, the DBE is attempting to assist learners in avoiding prolonged stays in basic education. However, teachers perceive them as learners who seem uninterested in these attempts, often attributing this to indolence and disruptive behaviours displayed throughout the learning process.

4.2 Theme 2: Confrontational attitude displayed by Progressed Learners

The participants also attributed PP to learners' aggressive attitude. They indicated that even when they try many methods to intimidate other learners with the possibility of failure, learners simply inform them that they are awaiting progression, often referred to as "the boat". They shared their views as follows:

"No matter how hard you try to threaten them, they know the policy; they tell you to your face that [ba emetse sekepe hore ba tshela] awaiting the boat to cross the river." (P3)

Another participant from School B agreed with P3's perspective on learners' understanding of PP and their ability to challenge teachers using it. He elaborated:

"They are familiar with the policy and use it to their advantage; they do not care. That disrupts those who are serious." (P5)

The data indicates that learners possess knowledge of the various components of the PP and remain unaffected even when teachers employ alternative methods to encourage them to fulfil the expected requirements for their own personal growth, such as acquiring skills and developing positive attitudes. This type of confrontation may deprive teachers of opportunities to engage students in their learning interests.

Contrary to the negative impact of PP, participants indicated that it may be helping others. However, they alleged that the number of learners it helps is less than the number of those who are troublesome. They revealed that some PLs exhibit good behaviour and are receptive to the assistance they get, ultimately achieving academic success. They shared the following:

"I think it also depends on individual characters. There are still some who are obedient, well-behaved, and become responsive to support, eventually passing, but not many compared to the troublesome ones." (P6)

4.3 Theme 3: Low self-esteem displayed by Progressed Learners

Being a PL is also associated with diminished self-esteem, leading learners to exhibit varying responses based on their capacity to cope with pressure. Participants from School B reported that PL exhibits various behaviours due to a specific form of inferiority. He shared the following:

"I think their attitudes. They often suffer from low self-esteem and an inferiority complex. Perhaps others feel bad because they are teased for not knowing anything, and for that, they develop mechanisms, in the form of behaviour, to deal with such a state." (P7)

The data indicate that, in addition to being disruptive, PL also exhibits another behaviour of negatively impacting learners with low self-esteem, causing them to lose faith in their abilities and potentially leading them to believe that school is not a suitable environment, resulting in a decision to drop out.

4.4 Theme 4: More personnel for the Department of Education as a strategy to mitigate behavioural challenges

The participants asserted that, to address PLs' behavioural challenges effectively, they need more personnel from the Department of Education. Alternatively, they

suggested prioritizing skills as the foundation of the curriculum and of the school selection process, which might effectively address PL and behavioural problems in schools. The participants from School A suggested the following:

"I think we need more support from the Department regarding the workforce. You see, when educator assistants were here during the COVID-19 pandemic, the load was not as much; we could try to reach them since we had additional support." (P1)

Another participant from the same school emphasised the importance of receiving assistance regarding the overcrowding issues caused by high repetition rates. He added:

"Our classes are overcrowded and schedule-packed; if you do not complete this by a certain time, you are considered unable to do so. For this, teachers quickly save their emotions by focusing on willing students and leaving those who are not ready. I think if we get additional teachers, this can change." (P2)

4.5 Theme 5: Introduce a talent-based approach to education

The participants proposed that monitoring learners' talent from elementary schools would be beneficial, as it would allow them to be placed in schools and environments that foster and develop their potential, rather than imposing the same curriculum on all students. One participant from School B shared:

"I think we should start identifying the talent of learners at the primary level and then direct them to schools that can accommodate and nurture such talent. Those who excel at soccer should be taken to a place where they can be nurtured by others who are skilled in the sport." (P7)

Another participant from School A expressed a viewpoint similar to P1's, illustrating how compelling learners to engage in activities they struggle with may ultimately affect their behaviour. He added:

"I agree; here, you are forcing someone who is not good at Mathematics or English to take these subjects. It demoralises such a person and changes his behaviour. You then have a learner with poor behaviour progressing from lower grades to Grade 12, which affects the culture of teaching and learning. I believe the talent-based approach to education is the best." (P4)

The data indicated that the mitigation approach for the challenges posed by the PP is to allocate additional personnel within the school to assist with the increased workload resulting from the PLs. Additionally, they suggested that learners should be permitted to focus on their areas of strength to prevent them from being compelled to engage in tasks they will never excel at, which could result in disruptive behaviour, confrontations with teachers and a loss of self-esteem.

5. Discussion

This study explored teachers' perceptions of how the PP shapes learner behaviour in quintile three secondary schools in the Free State. This discussion analytically interprets teachers' accounts through the lens of attribution theory, with particular attention to locus of causality (internal vs external) and controllability, as conceptualised in Weiner's attribution-based theory of motivation (Weiner,

2010). Attribution theory is instrumental in this context because teachers' causal explanations of learner behaviour influence expectations of change, emotional reactions, instructional investment, and disciplinary practices (Weiner, 2010; Martinko & Mackey, 2019; McLeod, 2023). By applying this framework, the discussion clarifies how PP becomes behaviourally meaningful in classrooms and identifies leverage points for more effective and equitable policy enactment.

Across the themes, two dominant attributional patterns are evident. First, teachers frequently locate behavioural challenges in internal and controllable learner characteristics, such as effort, attitude, and motivation. Second, when teachers recognise external and largely uncontrollable conditions, such as overcrowding and staffing constraints, their responses shift towards structural, solution-oriented recommendations. These patterns are unpacked below using attribution theory as an analytical framework.

5.1 Theme 1: Perceived indolence and the erosion of a learning culture

Teachers associate PP with declining learner effort and a weakened culture of teaching and learning, arguing that repeated progression without meeting minimum requirements reduces learners' motivation to engage academically. Analytically, this perception reflects internal, controllable attributions, in which disengagement is explained as a matter of learner choice rather than as a response to contextual or instructional constraints (Weiner, 2010). Attribution theory suggests that when teachers interpret behaviour as internally caused and controllable, they are more likely to reduce instructional persistence and redirect attention toward learners perceived as motivated (Weiner, 2010; McLeod, 2023).

This attributional response was evident in teachers' tendency to prioritise "willing learners" while withdrawing support from those viewed as disengaged. In PP contexts, such responses are particularly consequential because the policy presupposes continued academic and pedagogical support following progression (Department of Basic Education [DBE], 2015, 2017, 2022). When teachers' attributional judgements lead to diminished support, the intended supportive function of PP is undermined. The contribution of this theme lies in demonstrating that teachers do not view PP as affecting only individual learner outcomes, but as reshaping the collective behavioural ecology of classrooms. This extends existing PP debates beyond academic performance to include teachers' perceptions of cultural and normative shifts in learning environments.

5.2 Theme 2: Confrontational attitudes and learner resistance

Teachers reported that some learners invoke PP to challenge teacher authority, suggesting that progression is guaranteed regardless of effort or behaviour. While prior research has documented perceptions of progressed learners as disruptive or resistant (Hlasa & Gcelu, 2024), this study analytically demonstrates how policy awareness itself becomes a behavioural resource in teacher-learner interactions.

From an attributional perspective, teachers' interpretations of confrontation reflect internal and controllable attributions, framing resistance as intentional defiance rather than as a response to constrained accountability mechanisms under PP. Weiner's model predicts that such attributions elicit anger-based

emotional reactions, increasing the likelihood of punitive or avoidant practices (Weiner, 2010). Empirical studies similarly show that internal attributions are associated with more reactive and exclusionary responses to learner behaviour (Patnaik & Subban, 2023).

However, alternative interpretations suggest that some forms of resistance may be shaped by learners' experiences of marginalisation, repeated failure, or perceived loss of agency (Dube, 2025; Letuma, 2025). When teachers rely exclusively on internal attributions, opportunities for restorative or supportive responses are reduced. The analytical value of this theme lies in showing how PP is embedded in classroom power relations, influencing not only progression decisions but also everyday negotiations of discipline and authority.

5.3 Theme 3: Low self-esteem and behavioural coping responses

Teachers linked progression to diminished self-esteem, embarrassment, and feelings of inferiority, suggesting that some behavioural difficulties function as coping responses rather than deliberate misconduct. This interpretation aligns with evidence that progressed learners may experience stigma, humiliation, and emotional distress associated with academic underperformance (Khobe, 2021; Nkosi & Adebayo, 2021). Attribution theory highlights a critical tension in this theme. While teachers may interpret behavioural difficulties as internal and stable (e.g., "this learner is problematic"), learners' experiences point to external, unstable, and largely uncontrollable conditions, including repeated academic failure, peer teasing, and insufficient psychosocial support.

Weiner (2010) argues that stable attributions reduce expectancy for change and lead to declining instructional investment, whereas unstable attributions sustain hope and encourage supportive intervention. Consistent with this, empirical research shows that teachers are more likely to adopt adaptive strategies when behaviour is understood as context-responsive rather than learner-deficient (Martinko & Mackey, 2019; Kulinna, 2008). This theme reinforces the PP requirement that progression should be accompanied not only by academic remediation but also by psychosocial support (DBE, 2015, 2022). Its contribution lies in reframing behavioural challenges as issues of identity, belonging, and emotional regulation rather than simply discipline.

5.4 Theme 4: Personnel capacity and differentiated departmental support

Teachers emphasised that behavioural and instructional challenges associated with progressed learners cannot be addressed without additional personnel and targeted departmental support. Unlike earlier themes, teachers here located the causes of behavioural difficulties in external and largely uncontrollable systemic factors, such as overcrowding, heavy workloads, and insufficient staffing. Attribution theory predicts that external and uncontrollable attributions reduce blame and generate solution-oriented responses focused on structural change rather than learner deficit (Weiner, 2010; Martinko & Mackey, 2019; Patnaik & Subban, 2023). This was evident in teachers' calls for staffing models that account for the concentration of progressed learners rather than total enrolment. The analytical contribution of this theme lies in identifying a resource-allocation logic grounded in behavioural and instructional intensity rather than in generic staffing

norms, thereby extending the existing literature on PP implementation in high-progression schools.

5.5 Theme 5: A talent-based approach as behavioural mitigation

Teachers proposed a talent-based approach that recognizes learners' strengths and diversifies engagement pathways. Analytically, this theme addresses the attributional consequences of prolonged academic failure, which can foster internal, stable, and negative self-attributions (e.g., "I am incapable"), leading to disengagement and resistance (Weiner, 2010).

By creating opportunities for competence and success, a talent-based approach may interrupt maladaptive attributional cycles, promote more adaptive self-perceptions, and reduce behaviour associated with frustration and stigma. Although this strategy extends beyond the immediate mechanics of PP, it aligns with the policy's stated aim of supporting learner dignity, participation, and retention (DBE, 2015, 2022). The contribution of this theme lies in introducing a preventative, strength-based behavioural strategy into PP debates that are often dominated by compliance and remediation concerns.

6. Limitation

This qualitative study is limited in generalizability due to its small, context-specific sample of 7 teachers from 2 quintile, 3 secondary schools in the Free State. The findings reflect only teachers' perspectives and exclude those of learners, school management teams, and parents. Epistemologically, the study is grounded in the assumption that meanings are socially constructed; thus, the findings represent teachers' interpretations of learner behaviour rather than objective behavioural realities. These interpretations are shaped by teachers' professional roles, institutional pressures, and policy contexts.

In addition, teachers' accounts may reflect attributional bias, particularly a tendency to emphasize internal and controllable explanations for learner behaviour over external or systemic factors. Although attribution theory was used to analyze these patterns, such attributions may not fully capture learners' lived experiences or structural constraints. Finally, reliance on self-reported data and the absence of longitudinal analysis limit insight into how perceptions and attributions may change over time.

7. Recommendations for Further Research

The findings of this study suggest several tentative implications that warrant further empirical investigation rather than definitive policy prescriptions. Future studies may adopt a multi-perspective approach by including progressed learners, parents, and school management teams to develop a more holistic understanding of how the Progression Policy shapes learner behaviour. Longitudinal research could explore how behavioural patterns and academic engagement among progressed learners evolve. Quantitative or mixed-methods studies may further examine the relationships between progression, learner behaviour, and academic performance across different school quintiles.

In addition, future research could investigate the feasibility and potential impact of targeted support interventions, such as additional staffing or remedial programmes, in schools with high numbers of progressed learners. Finally, exploratory studies examining talent-based or differentiated curriculum pathways within the South African context may contribute valuable evidence to ongoing policy debates.

8. Conclusion

This study explored teachers' interpretations of how the Progression Policy shapes learner behaviour in quintile three secondary schools in the Free State. The findings illuminate how teachers make sense of learner disengagement, confrontation, and low self-esteem within the context of progression. Through an attributional lens, the study shows that teachers frequently interpret behavioural challenges as internally driven and controllable, while less often recognising the external and systemic conditions that shape learner behaviour. These attributional explanations are significant because they influence teachers' expectations, emotional responses, and patterns of instructional engagement, thereby shaping everyday classroom practices.

By foregrounding teachers' meaning-making processes, the study offers interpretive insight into how the Progression Policy is enacted at the classroom level, not only as a regulatory framework but also as a lens through which learner behaviour is understood and responded to. The conclusion, therefore, emphasises the importance of attending to teachers' attributional frameworks when considering how progression policies are experienced in practice, particularly in contexts marked by resource constraints and learner diversity.

Conflict of Interest.

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this manuscript.

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