

# Ascribing Learner Development to Quality Schooling: A Case of Three Schools

NS Modiba

University of Limpopo, South Africa

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**Abstract:** The paper critiques how lack of quality schooling encourages grade repetition in South African public secondary schools. This paper is empirical in approach as it uses cases of selected schools in Limpopo province. Interviewing and document analysis were used to collect data from three selected public secondary schools, Capricorn District of Limpopo Province, South Africa. Research findings reveal that, firstly, an enabling learning environment contributes to quality schooling. Secondly, failure to expose learners to meteoric rise through constant scholastic performance, conditions pupils to grade repetition. Thirdly, failure to embrace the decolonisation project as a 21<sup>st</sup> century way of approaching management and leadership of teaching and learning, compromises quality schooling for pupils. Lastly, failure, to expose pupils to looping, which is allowing teachers to go to the next grade with their learners, delays pupils from coping with new teachers they face there and thus underachieve and confirm the existence of lack of quality schooling in an educational institution. As part of the conclusion, the researcher recommends for all schools to take a firm stand that one pupil underachieving in their educational institution, is one learner too many.

**Keywords:** Achieve, Environment, Grade Repetition, Looping

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## 1. Introduction

For the 21<sup>st</sup> century schools, learner underachievement has to be a taboo. Gold (2016: 8) accentuates that decent schooling remains a stress-buster for the organisational incumbents. This suggests that with a sound schooling in place, grade repetition is eliminated. The quality schooling under discussion in this paper is being comprehended by Sebola (2015:61) as the creation of a structure and order which cannot be externally imposed. They result from interaction between a multiplicity of governing nodes which influence each other in the creation of a certain order or behaviour. Every school requires order and a certain way of behaving by all its members for a learning institution to succeed with its core-function of teaching and learning. Schools experiencing quality schooling discharge their core-function of dispensing knowledge different from their counterparts. For instance, pupils in such schools are likely to radiate with enthusiasm and pride when coming to their lessons. Heilbron (2018:4) concedes that learners in quality schools are groomed and cultured never to compare themselves to others and never to get discouraged by the progress and success of others. Of note is that pupils in such schools grow up to be generous and committed humanitarians in their society. This suggests that quality schools succeed in developing a learner as a totality where he/she will be able to fit in his/her own society and be of value

to others. Sobuwa (2018:11) reminds that teachers in quality schools, are not likely to involve themselves in mutinous actions that jeopardise learning however, legitimate their grievances could be. This implies pupils are likely to experience a complete learner development that occurs free from any form of grade repetition. Quality schools do not make a big deal out of nothing. This signifies that quality schools are not in the news for the wrong reasons such as turning learners back home over putting on skinny pants. This is not to imply that quality schools are promoting lawlessness, ill-discipline and disorder by learners. Clarke (2009:14) reminds that high-performing and functional institutions are free from tensions in the sense that parents would not be baying for the blood of teachers who are accused of incompetence inside the classrooms. Quality schooling is known to be contributing to learner development (Msila, 2016:31). With a sound schooling in place, an institution that was known to be struggling in terms of producing brilliant and exquisite learner results, could turn the tide and register exceptional learner performance. Furthermore, quality schooling is known to be able to teach how to decimate and professionally resolve organisational challenges other than magnifying or aggravating them (Fox, 2010; Theletsane, 2014; Moyo, 2015:16). Khoza (2015:43) and Masina (2015:24) contend that where grade repetition is eradicated, with full learner development occurring, the delivery of quality schooling to all learners is possible.

Nkuna (2015:120) and Tisdall (2015:15) remark that apartheid has instilled in African learners a sense of self-hate and inferiority complex to the level of battling to create sustainable quality schooling. Pupils in quality schools are encouraged never to doubt themselves and their potential to achieve with their academic activities (Yukl, 2006; Motsepe, 2015:5). Shejavali (2015:34) and Siswana (2007:182) assert that conspicuous indicators of inefficacious and poor quality schooling are the dysfunctional institutional systems and structures prevalent in many public secondary schools which are also responsible for the underachievement of those schools as well as their spiralling grade repetition.

## 2. Theoretical Considerations

The critical theory has been selected to underpin this paper. Its choice rests in the relevance the researcher finds in it in terms of sufficiently illuminating issues of how, if left unabated, grade repetition obstructs learner development (Welman, Kruger, & Mitchel, 2005). Apart from enabling the researcher to frame this paper, the critical theory helped the researcher to make meaning from the whole notion of quality schooling and how it triggers learner development which incorporates minimising or completely eradicating grade repetition by pupils. One of the principles of the critical theory is that very often truth serves the status quo. The other principle relates to the question of "why is it that certain groups of people are so privileged in life than others"? These fundamental principles were helpful in clarifying how grade repetition would persist to be a thorn on the flesh of schools, unless quality schooling occurs in all schools. The contradiction with such a sordid state of affairs lies in the point that some learners are already being advantaged by where they are schooling much as others are already disadvantaged (Motsepe, 2015:5). Lack of decent schooling makes it difficult for the school governors and managers to be accountable to their customers, namely, learners and parents due to failing to service pupils appropriately. That the three selected secondary schools in this paper, are still experiencing lack of satisfactory learner development, has to be a cause for concern. The question to pose is whether the absence of adequate learner development is a deliberate or a demonstration of a sheer incompetence by three secondary schools under study. It is the critical theory which is better placed to adequately and convincingly respond to such a question (Moyo, 2015:16; Tisdall, 2015:15). In this paper, the

critical theory reveals that inequality in schooling, in the form of experiencing enabling learning environment and decolonisation in some schools and not in others, it is an unfortunate occurrence. Higgs and Smith (2010:67) advises that comprehending how quality schooling service is denied to learners, the context of the manifestation of denial of that quality schooling service, is essential. The critical theory assists in arriving at the root cause of grade repetition as the lack of quality schooling (Van Niekerk & Van Niekerk, 2009:12). (Arden, 2013:38; Allen, 2015:11) remind that the critical theory advocates for critical reflection on society, schooling included, in order to discover the hidden assumptions that maintain the existing power relationships that keep the societal members perpetually enslaved though in a different form and guise.

Hofstee (2010:110) avows that no skill is more useful than the ability to recognise and articulate a problem clearly and concisely. On the basis of the above, the problem of this paper centres around critiquing why some public secondary schools persist to struggle to overcome grade repetition, despite its notoriety. A plethora of literature reviewed attests that educational institutions pulling hard to eradicate grade repetition end up having an exodus of pupils vacating those learning institutions to where an enterprise of teaching and learning is handled differently (Ngcukana, 2018:6). When schools deliver quality lessons and scholastic learner performance is consistently high, that school could attract more pupils.

## 3. Research Questions

The research questions addressed in this paper are anchored on the critical theory as the theoretical perspective that underscores the paper (Higgs & Smith, 2010:88). Those research questions are as follow: what is the role and significance of the enabling learning environment, in eradicating grade repetition and facilitate learner development within the quality schooling fold? What are the ideas, desires and aspirations of educational stakeholders to the resurrection of the underachieving school into a high-performing institution? This paper intends to answer the following research questions.

- How is grade repetition understood and handled?
- How does grade repetition obstruct learner development?

- How does decolonisation boost quality schooling and learner development?
- How is learner looping linked to learner development?

#### **4. Research Methodology**

The research approach in this paper is a qualitative in nature. This stems amongst others from, the problem which the paper pursued, namely, critiquing why some public secondary schools persist to struggle to overcome grade repetition, despite its notoriety (Dawson, 2006; Levin, 2005). Interviewing and document analysis, as data collection tools, helped immensely in terms of illuminating issues of how, grade repetition obstructs learner development. The absence of decolonisation by some public secondary schools, revealed to be compromising decent schooling. A good case in point for such a state of affairs happens annually when some secondary schools keep on experiencing unabated scholastic underperformance of learners. This occurs amongst others as a result of lack of enabling teaching and learning environment and the absence of the culture of learner meteoric rise as well as the absence of looping (Masina, 2015:24). A good barometer for lack of decolonisation is persistent underachievement of schools. Literature confirms that decolonisation could overcome perennial under-functioning of schools. Partnering the qualitative research approach and the critical theory enabled the researcher to make an in-depth understanding of why grade repetition as the product of poor quality schooling and the absence of learner development, are proceeding unabated in the new dispensation. To conclude, interviewing techniques and document analysis were utilised to construct data relevant for this paper. All the documents, primary and secondary containing information about quality schooling, learner development and grade repetition by public secondary schools, were studied. To corroborate and triangulate the gleaned data, interviewing was conducted with three stakeholders in each of the three sampled secondary schools. Responses were audio-taped for transcription later-on. The said data collection tools emerged very helpful in terms of accessing information pertaining to how quality schooling is a precursor to learner development and a remedy to unabated grade repetition faced by schools. Poor quality schooling reduces learners into sub-human beings denied of decent schooling (Glatthorn & Joyner, 2005).

The three public secondary schools critiqued on the quality of schooling and learner development are being referred to as School A, School B and School C respectively to protect their actual identities. Prior to the commencement of the process of data collection through the mentioned data collection tools, the researcher adhered to the ethical consideration issues such as securing permission from the Limpopo Department of Education as well as from the University ethics committee. Consent of research participants was not ignored. Out of the population of fifteen secondary schools, three were conveniently sampled for in-depth study on the stated problem. Content analysis and the constant comparative methods were utilised to make making out of the gleaned data which were audio-taped. Analysis of data led to themes which were applied to author findings of this paper under the guidance of literature reviewed. This is an interview-based research – an interview schedule was developed in advance and piloted with each of the category research participants, namely a school principal, an SGB Chairperson and a learner who was the President of the Representative Council of Learners. In each of the sampled three secondary schools the said three categories of research participants were interviewed. Altogether, nine research participants were interviewed (Welman *et al.*, 2005).

#### **5. Findings and Discussion**

Findings arrived at in this paper, are in relation to the aim whose focus is: critiquing how lack of quality schooling persists to lead to grade repetition. The basis of the findings is the analysed data which were generated through the interviewing technique and document analysis. The researcher sampled those public secondary schools for scrutiny in the area of quality schooling and learner development and the eradication of perennial grade repetition. The choice of those three public secondary schools, was on the basis of the researcher having familiarised himself with issues of learner development and quality schooling three, down the years. The critical theory was helpful in the analysis of data to ultimately emerge with below findings. Findings and discussion for this paper are the following: the significance of an enabling learning environment, how learner meteoric rise conditions pupils to success other than to failure, how the absence of decolonisation consolidates lack of quality schooling which obstructs learner development and how the absence of learner looping leads to grade repetition. A detailed discussion of each finding follows.

## 5.1 An Enabling Learning Environment

Exquisite teaching and learning happen easily after the establishment of the necessary institutional structures, systems, policies, procedures, processes and appropriate schooling environment. The South African Schools Act 84 of 1996 proclaims that doing that is the competency of the school governors (Brunton, 2003:B-11). On this point of superior performance, owing its origin to quality schooling which triggers learner development, School Principal 1 of School A laments that "some of us who when becoming principals, landed in schools whose environments where detached from facilitating good teaching and learning, will take long to turn a tide with regard to using the internal environment to produce learners who are self-driven and industrious". SGB Chairperson 2 of School C shares that "I was more than privileged to serve in a primary school whose learning environment was simply matchless because of having being generated by previous governors who knew how much a good environment supports quality teaching and learning". Learner Representative Council 2 of school A asserts that "without a pupil-friendly schooling environment, any school irrespective of the unequalled competency of a principal would always pull hard to perpetually produce praise-worthy results". All research respondents place adequate attention to the school environment for the sake of salvaging the future of many learners. Even the review of literature is not mute about that. For instance, Tsheola (2002), Mbeki (2003), Madue (2013), Zwane (2015:10) and Pela (2018:16) emphasise that efficacious quality schooling as generated by the enabling environments, is what 21<sup>st</sup> century organisations require and demand for smooth operations.

## 5.2 Learner Meteoric Rise

Where pupils have been conditioned to an atmosphere of exceptional and excellent learner results, they are likely to work hard to produce that kind of results. This is because those are the only type of pupil-results they are used to and not any other (Adams, 2015; Macha, 2016:23). It makes absolute sense for schools to expose their pupils to an atmosphere of meteoric learner rise. This is the kind of atmosphere where no single learner would love to see themselves repeating a grade. On this challenge of grade repetition, School Principal 3 of School C cautions that "every school reaps what it sows referring to diverse pupil-results which different

schools even in the same vicinity perpetually produce". SGB Chairperson 3 of the same school states that "show me a single school whose learner performance is annually excellent, which is not producing those mouth-watering pupil-results being helped by a sound schooling climate and culture in place there". Learner Representative Council 2 of School B accentuates that "having noticed what a culture of meteoric learner rise does for this school, it will not be long before other schools make their journeys over here to see how the business of teaching and learning is being handled". As a researcher, I fully align myself with the observation by the research respondents that any scholastic learner achievement which is not ascribed to the available quality schooling culture, may not last long. The body of literature reviewed confirms in no uncertain terms the expressed views. For instance, Gobillot (2008), Cunha, Filho & Goncalvers (2010) advocate that the indispensability of a quality schooling as created by the appropriate atmosphere and culture towards the functionality of an educational institution, remains irreplaceable.

## 5.3 The Absence of Decolonisation

Allen (2014:9) remarks that as long as the creation of efficacious quality schooling is not taken as a priority by schools, then matching decent schooling to learner development within the decolonised schooling atmosphere could remain an unabated challenge. This suggests that apart from learner development relying on quality schooling for its occurrence, the prevalence of an atmosphere free from colonialist vestiges is necessary. On this point of decolonisation as invigorating quality schooling, School Principal 1 of School A concedes that "continuing to run our schools like in the past where as head-teachers we were following rules and regulations rigidly, is just not on with the evolved teaching and learning moods in schools of these days". SGB Chairperson 3 of School C reasons that "despite not fully clear about what the concept decolonisation entails, judging from how it is gaining momentum, it could help the governance of our schools to be different, considering the problem of learner-bullying prevalent in schools". Learner Representative Council 1 of School A cautions that "the unending battle learners are waging with the school management and the general teaching population could tone down, the time the school becomes transparent, open, consultative and transformative following the decolonisation route with the decisions taken

and implemented". These research participants blatantly confirm that, there is no longer turning back from the decolonisation movement. Schools have to embrace decolonisation and see if myriad ongoing challenges would not subside. This is being vindicated by countless literature reviewed for the sake of this paper (Omano, 2005; Kouzes & Posner, 2007; Thornhill & Van Dijk, 2010; Sebola, 2012; Qwabe, 2013 & Tisdall, 2005:15).

#### 5.4 Lack of Learner Looping

Learner looping is a fairly new concept in many educational institutions. However, its suitability in the 21<sup>st</sup> century schooling is beyond questioning. This is on the basis of the crop of learners and teachers currently populating public secondary schools. Looping is well-intentioned in the sense that it addresses the obstacle of pupils struggling to adapt to the manner in which a teacher engages with knowledge (Heilbron, 2018:14). The philosophy of looping is that pupils proceed to the next grade with a teacher they were with in the previous grade. Logically, learner-looping works well where a school has successfully done away with grade repetition. This enables learners who were with the teacher the previous year, to meet her in the next grade. Prior to the operationalization of looping in schools, the routine of grade repetition, needs to be confronted and obliterated (Modiba, 2018:1; Sobuwa, 2018:11). School Principal 1 of School C states that "looping sounds an excellent idea, but hard to implement in our own schools where grade repetition is a huge burden". SGB Chairperson 3 of School 2 concedes that "looping should have been introduced sooner rather than later, to encourage pupils to take their studies seriously, knowing that the next teacher could be tougher than the current educator". Learner Representative Council 2 of School A reminds that "as long as there are boring educators, classrooms would convert into the battle-field and not the learning sides". The responses of research participants, confirm looping to be a nice idea, although it needs that the learning site first be levelled to allow it to thrive and flourish (Yukl, 2006).

#### 6. Conclusion

Secondary schools need to speedily deal with the challenge of inefficacious learner development. This will enable them to improve their scholastic pupil performance. Whether hurdles associated with

quality schooling experienced by public schools are internally generated or externally imposed, that is immaterial. The question to ask has to be: what is it that every public secondary school should be doing, to create an enabling learning environment that triggers learner development within the quality schooling fold? This is possible with sound governance that is well-tailored to institutional incumbents. Such healthy governance needs to be free from euro-centric models and general institutional rigidity. The postponement of creating enabling learning environment could delay the introduction of the culture of meteoric learner rise. Such a state of affairs could allow learner-underachievement and general institutional dysfunctionality to soar. To boost learner development, experimentation with decolonisation of schools, is essential to enable schools to embrace looping.

#### 7. Recommendations

The basis of these recommendations are the discussed findings which are as follow: There is a need for public secondary schools to establish for themselves, why is it that the significance of an enabling learning environment is being underrated in those schools, despite its known efficacy in generating institutional performance everybody would be proud of. There is a need for public secondary schools to embrace an awareness that a constant meteoric learner rise in an educational institution sows a new culture of performance by learners, where grade repetition disappears. That occurs through the creation of a strong governance ethos that promote a school's exquisite and maverick learner results. There is a need for educational institutions to embrace decolonisation and utilise that to introduce looping which could allow teachers to proceed to the next grade with their previous year pupils. Finally, there is a need for public secondary schools to take a firm stand that one pupil underachieving in their educational institution, is one learner too many.

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