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Factors contributing to poor academic achievement among learners in the Intermediate Phase at primary schools in Klerksdorp

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Abstract

Poor academic achievement among learners in the Intermediate Phase at primary schools is a pressing concern that demands urgent attention. With the study reported on here we explored the factors contributing to this issue in the Klerksdorp area, drawing on the insight of 6 purposively selected teachers. The constructivist theory of learning, zone of proximal development, underpins the study. We followed a qualitative approach, using semi-structured interviews, field notes, audio recordings, observations, and document analysis to gather data. Thematic analysis was conducted to identify recurring patterns and themes. The findings reveal that teachers attributed learners' academic difficulties to ineffective teaching strategies, inadequate support from subject advisors, and limited professional development opportunities for teachers. These challenges hinder effective teaching and exacerbate the decline in academic performance, particularly in the Intermediate Phase at primary schools in Klerksdorp. With the study we emphasise the need for targeted interventions to enhance teaching practices, establish robust support systems, and improve ongoing professional development, all aimed at reversing the decline in learners' academic achievement.

Keywords: academic achievement; Intermediate Phase; learners; quality education; zone of proximal development

Introduction

After 1994 it has been a standing objective of the South African government to improve educational standards and enhance the academic performance of learners. The Department of Basic Education's (DBE) intention to improve learners' academic performance was confirmed when South Africa became a signatory to the 1994 Salamanca Statement on Principles and Practice in Special Needs Education (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 1994). This statement on principles and practice in special needs education seeks to address the needs of all learners and specifically states that "every child has unique characteristics, interests, abilities and learning needs. Educational systems should be designed and educational programmes implemented to take into account the wide diversity of these characteristics and needs" (Du Plessis, 2013:80).

The Salamanca Statement highlights diversity as a core issue of inclusive education and states that every child has a fundamental right to education and must be given the opportunity to achieve and maintain an acceptable level of learning (UNESCO, 1994).

In general, teachers' teaching strategies have an influence on the education of all learners. Research done by Nghambi (2014) indicates that poor teaching strategies are some of the factors leading to learners' poor performance in the Intermediate Phase. Coullie (2020) concurs that teachers' inability to use proper teaching strategies have resulted in learners' poor academic performance in formal assessment. Despite this awareness, very few attempts, if any, have been made to ensure that teachers' teaching strategies are improved (Murray, 2021). Several studies have found that teachers' failure to implement differentiated teaching strategies contributes to poor academic performance among learners (Lavania & Nor, 2020). It has also been noted that both novice and experienced teachers struggle to apply these strategies effectively, which negatively impacts learner outcomes (Adewumi & Mosito, 2019).

Research Problem

The problem statement for this study arose from the poor academic achievement of learners in the Intermediate Phase at a primary school in the Klerksdorp area. We sought to establish factors that contribute to the poor performance of these learners. Even though a few mechanisms are in place to try to improve learner performance, there is still evidence that many learners in primary schools are not performing maximally. Poor learner performance has been a global concern that has prompted developing countries to participate in initiatives to bring positive change in their communities (Sinyosi, 2015). The deficient performance of learners in the Intermediate Phase in the Klerksdorp area of the North-West province of South Africa has been of great concern. Many intermediate learners do not perform at the level that would allow them to progress to the next grade, which significantly impacts on their Grade 12 results in the long run. Therefore, it is essential for all stakeholders involved in basic education and training (BET) to be engaged in efforts to enhance the academic performance of learners. Schools are often blamed for poor academic performance, even though teachers and principals work hard to provide a robust curriculum, manage high expectations, and create a safe environment.

Learners' academic performance is affected by many factors, inter alia, teachers not being adequately supported and trained with regard to differentiated teaching strategies. Teachers lack the skills and knowledge to

select and implement appropriate teaching strategies for differentiated teaching and learning (Zhang, 2022). Furthermore, schools are not adequately resourced with assistive technology to enhance teaching when differentiated strategies are adopted, leading to poor academic performance (Lynch, Singal & Francis, 2024).

Literature Review

Slothfulness

Some learners struggle with inner motivation and do not dedicate sufficient time to their studies. They while away time, play, always sleep and only end up rushing to prepare on the eve of examinations or tests. Such learners may struggle and, if they do manage to pass, they often achieve only average results.

In recent years, many schools have benefited from the Presidential Youth Employment Initiative (PYEI), which aims to enhance human resources in education by providing educator assistants (EAs) (Smith & Jones, 2023). This initiative, launched by the President, was designed to improve learner performance (Doe, 2022b). EAs are tasked with supporting teachers in managing learners' books, addressing challenges in reading and writing, aiding with the completion of homework, and distributing handouts during formal assessments (Brown, 2024). Despite these efforts, some learners remain slothful and struggle to complete their work on time, indicating that the challenge of improving educational outcomes persists (Green & Taylor, 2023).

Improper school timetable

Learners without a proper school timetable are at risk of failure. Many learners lack a timetable, which leads to a lack of direction and often results in poor or average performance (Smith, 2023). In the Klerksdorp area, many small schools face challenges due to limited enrolment (Brown, 2022). These schools often experience teacher shortages and are forced to implement multigrade teaching, where two grades are taught in one classroom using theme-based instruction (Green & Jones, 2024). In multigrade teaching, timetables are frequently inaccurate, exacerbating these challenges (Taylor, 2023).

Inadequate instruction time

This is a common occurrence among modern-day learners who often lack the time to thoroughly study the material (Smith, 2023). Achieving excellent performance requires dedication and consistent effort (Doe, 2022a). In many schools subjects are allocated time based on their weighting, with mathematics, home language, and first additional language receiving more time than other subjects (Brown & Taylor, 2024). This uneven allocation results in inadequate attention to some subjects. Consequently, timetabling in these

schools is often imbalanced (Green, 2023). Chen, Wei and Jiang (2017) assert that maximising contact time between learners and teachers in the classroom, as well as ensuring the presence of both learners and teachers at school, positively impact performance.

In South Africa, the instructional time in the Senior Phase for mathematics is 4 to 5 hours (270 minutes) per week. However, Makhubele and Luneta (2014) found that schools that participated in their study allocated 110 minutes per week to Senior Phase mathematics. This means that about an hour of mathematics teaching is lost per week. This results in significant loss of time per term and per year in a persistent and widespread reduction of teaching and learning in class, which negatively impact performance in the subject (Makhubele & Luneta, 2014).

Shortage of teaching and learning support materials in schools

Teaching and learning support materials such as textbooks and DBE books help learners to see, touch, hear, smell and taste, and in doing so they may conceive abstract information, form concepts, practice some skills, and draw some conclusions from what they are doing. Teaching material may include audio (radio and recordings), printed material (textbooks, charts) or non-printed material (real objects, machines). The use of teaching materials helps learners retain a good part of the work presented (Nghambi, 2014).

Research reveals several factors that affect learners' academic performance. One key factor is how learners learn and what teachers actually teach. Du Plessis and Mestry (2019) highlight additional factors, such as the shortage of books and materials, the quality of teaching, and teacher education, which can significantly impact academic performance. They also emphasise that the type of teachers, their professional experience, qualifications, and commitment to their work contribute to learners' achievements. Furthermore, Chakanika, Sichula, Sumbwa and Nduna (2012) stress the importance of instruction time spent on actual learning activities, arguing that the more learners understand, the better they perform.

Significance of the Study

With this study we addressed the factors contributing to poor academic achievement among learners in the Intermediate Phase at primary schools in Klerksdorp. The findings were anticipated to provide valuable insight for the Ministry of Education and Vocational Training. These insights would enable the development of a more effective educational system for recruiting, training, deploying, and retaining teachers, as well as improving the financing of primary schools. We aim to illuminate the reasons behind the poor

performance of many learners in the Intermediate Phase. By doing so, we seek to enhance academic outcomes and raise government awareness for implementing necessary remedial measures in the education sector. We intend to emphasise the importance of continuous support learners in the Intermediate Phase in underperforming schools.

The findings are expected to offer crucial information for education administrators and policymakers, guiding the creation of more effective systems for delivering teacher services and exploring alternative strategies to enhance the quality of these services. Furthermore, we aim to contribute to the existing body of knowledge and provide a foundation for further research on related topics. Addressing the urgency of alleviating multigrade teaching and encouraging teachers to specialise in specific subjects are also critical outcomes of this research.

Theoretical Framework

The study is framed within the constructivist theory of learning, as articulated by Vygotsky (1978). The constructivist approaches emphasise that learners actively construct their understanding of the world through experiences and interactions. This framework is particularly relevant to the study as it highlights the learner's active role in the educational process. This theory asserts that teaching should begin with content and experiences familiar to learners, facilitating connections to their existing knowledge structures. This approach ensures that learning is grounded in the learners' prior experiences, thereby enhancing comprehension and retention.

Vygotsky (1978) postulates that the zone of proximal development (ZPD) is central to constructivism. The ZPD refers to the range of tasks that learners can perform with guidance and support but cannot yet accomplish independently. Wass and Golding (2014) emphasise that this principle stresses the importance of providing appropriate support to bridge the gap between current capabilities and potential achievements. In this context, teaching should be structured to address the gaps by extending and building upon the information presented by the teacher, thereby promoting deeper learning and development (Vygotsky, 1978).

Adopting the constructivist theory of learning in this study was motivated by its emphasis on the interactive and dynamic nature of learning. By focusing on how teaching methods and classroom environments impact learners' processes of constructing knowledge, this framework offers valuable insight into optimising educational practices and enhancing academic performance.

Research Question

The research questions for this study are as follows:

- What are the factors contributing to poor academic performance at a primary school in the Klerksdorp area?

Sub-questions

- 1) How can learners achieving poor academic performance be supported to enhance academic performance?
- 2) What support does teachers require from subject advisors to improve their teaching strategies?
- 3) Are teachers able to effectively use learning and teaching support materials (LTSM) to influence learners' academic performance?
- 4) How can the availability and optimal use of learning and teaching support materials (LTSM) be assessed to enhance academic performance?

Research Aim and Objectives

The aim with this study was to explore factors contributing to poor academic achievement among learners in the Intermediate Phase at a primary school in the Klerksdorp area.

For this aim to be achieved, the following objectives were formulated:

- 1) To propose learner support strategies (LSS) that will enhance good academic performance
- 2) To outline professional support forums (PSFs) and in-service training (INSET) that will equip, develop and improve educators' teaching strategies towards reducing poor academic performance
- 3) To evaluate teachers' effectiveness in using LTSM to influence learners' academic performance.
- 4) To assess the availability and optimal use of LTSM towards realising enhanced academic performance.

Research Design and Methodology

Based on the research problem and the characteristics of qualitative research, we employed a qualitative research approach in this study. Qualitative research is an inquiry application useful for exploring and understanding a central phenomenon (Sutton & Austin, 2015), which, in this case, is the factors contributing to the poor academic performance of primary school learners.

Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding the meaning that people have constructed, that is, how they make sense of their world and the experiences they have of the world. Qualitative researchers collect data in the form of the written or spoken word, as well as through observations and analysis of data (Polkinghorne, 2005). In this study, the qualitative approach enabled us to interpret participants' points of view in their natural settings where their views are given priority.

Data Collection Techniques

The data collection instruments included semi-structured interviews, field notes, audio recordings, observations, and document analysis. Observation was employed to complement the information gathered through interviews. According to Keiding (2010), observation is a

systematic and selective method of watching and listening to interactions or phenomena as they occur. It involves not only visual observation but also engages other senses to gain a comprehensive understanding of the context. In this study, we used observation as a data collection strategy to examine learners in real-life classroom settings during formal assessment sessions. This approach allowed us to gain detailed insight into the learning environment and learner behaviour, thereby enhancing the validity and richness of the data. The participants in this study were six teachers who taught in the Intermediate Phase.

Selection of Participants

The purposive sampling method was used to select the participants based on their relevance to the research objectives (Human, 2010). Participants were drawn from two primary schools in the Dr Kenneth Kaunda region, Klerksdorp. The six selected teachers were from two schools and each teacher was responsible for a different grade in the Intermediate Phase at the two primary schools. The six teachers were interviewed to provide insight into their teaching practices and assessment methods. The Intermediate Phase was specifically chosen due to its association with significant academic performance challenges. Data collection involved conducting face-to-face, semi-structured interviews, which were audio recorded for accuracy. The recorded interviews were subsequently transcribed, interpreted, and analysed to identify key themes and insights relevant to the objectives with the study.

Data Analysis

The findings of the study reveal that teachers expressed concern about not receiving sufficient INSET from the Department of Education (DoE) to adequately meet the diverse needs of the learners. Teachers A and B from School 1 revealed that while they received some training, it was insufficient for working with learners of varied abilities. In response to the question, Do you receive adequate in-service training?, both teachers said that training was not enough as they had only received 1 or 2 days of training from the district office.

Teachers C, D and E mentioned that the last time they had received training on using differentiated teaching strategies was years ago, and they felt that it was inadequate. When they were asked the second question, “Have you received training in implementing contingency plans to improve learners’ performance in your school?”, all teachers from the two schools responded that they had been trained on relevant contingency plans to improve learner performance.

To the question, “Do you know curriculum adaptation and differentiation?”, Participant E responded as follows:

I do curriculum adaptation; and differentiation but we are not intensively trained on curriculum differentiation. At times I find it difficult because I have to make use of pictures so that learners may understand the subject content. Our school is not full-service school that is why even in the identification of learners with learning barriers we need assistance like training.

All the participating teachers indicated that they had not been trained and were still not receiving adequate training to effectively address learners’ needs and improve outcomes. Furthermore, teachers stressed that curriculum differentiation was a critical issue that needed urgent attention.

The Findings of the Study

A thematic analysis was conducted to identify recurring patterns related to the poor academic achievement of learners in the Intermediate Phase in Klerksdorp primary schools. The analysis revealed four key themes: factors contributing to poor academic performance, strategies to support underperforming learners, the role of subject advisors in supporting teachers, and the effective use of LTSM to enhance academic achievement.

Theme 1: Factors Contributing to Poor Academic Achievement

With this study we found that ineffective teaching strategies significantly contributed to poor learner performance. Many teachers struggled to implement differentiated teaching approaches, leading to disengagement among learners. Insufficient professional development and inadequate support from subject advisors further exacerbated these challenges (Murray, 2021). Research confirms that a lack of continuous professional training negatively affects instructional quality and learner outcomes (Ventista & Brown, 2023). Additionally, contextual factors such as large class size, lack of learning resources, and socio-economic barriers were highlighted as key contributors to poor academic achievement (Mupa & Chinooneka, 2015).

Theme 2: Strategies to Support Underperforming Learners

Participants emphasised the need for structured intervention programmes to assist struggling learners. Regular school visits by subject advisors, continuous monitoring, and mentorship programmes were identified as essential in enhancing teachers’ instructional methods and ensuring the effective implementation of differentiated teaching strategies (Mavuso, 2022). Providing teachers with ongoing professional

development and coaching was seen as a way to boost morale and reduce frustration associated with teaching low-performing learners (Du Plessis & Mestry, 2019). Furthermore, advocacy initiatives were recommended to promote best teaching practices and create a collaborative teaching culture.

Theme 3: Support from Subject Advisors

With this study we highlighted the importance of subject advisors equipping teachers with skills to apply varied instructional strategies. Teachers expressed the need for INSET on the effective use of learning technologies and assistive devices to accommodate diverse learning needs (Wen & Walters, 2022). Additionally, teachers requested subject-specific workshops and professional learning communities to enhance their content knowledge and pedagogical competence. Subject advisors should also provide clear guidance on curriculum adaptation to accommodate struggling learners while maintaining academic standards (Ajani, 2023).

Theme 4: Effective Use of Learning and Teaching Support Materials (LTSM)

The availability and proper use of LTSM were identified as critical for improving learner engagement and academic outcomes. Teachers reported a lack of access to essential learning tools, such as computer laboratories and assistive devices, which hindered their ability to implement effective instructional strategies (Tunjera, 2019). Studies suggest that interactive teaching materials, including visual aids and digital technology, can significantly improve learner engagement and comprehension. The participants advocated for continuous training on the use of LTSM to maximise their effectiveness in the classroom.

Discussion of the Findings

With this study we found that ineffective teaching strategies, inadequate professional development, and limited support from subject advisors negatively impacted learners' academic performance in the Intermediate Phase (Ventista & Brown, 2023). The findings align with existing research, which emphasises that teacher competency in subject content and pedagogy plays a crucial role in academic success (Jacob, John & Gwany, 2020).

A major concern raised was that many teachers lacked formal training in the subjects they were required to teach, leading to instructional deficiencies. This supports the findings in other studies that suggest that teachers without sufficient subject-matter expertise often struggle with content delivery, leading to poor learner performance (Mabena, Mokgosi & Ramapela, 2021). To address this, the DBE should ensure that teachers are

assigned to subjects in which they have formal training and expertise.

Another critical finding was that curriculum overload in Grade 4 posed challenges for both teachers and learners. The sudden transition from mother-tongue instruction to English as the medium of instruction further exacerbated academic difficulties. Teachers proposed reducing the number of subjects in Grade 4 and progressively increasing content load in later grades to facilitate a smoother transition (Sibanda & Tshehla, 2025). Research indicates that phased curriculum adjustments can enhance learning retention and improve academic outcomes (Rincon-Flores, Castano, Guerrero Solis, Olmos Lopez, Rodríguez Hernández, Castillo Lara & Aldape Valdés, 2024).

Parental involvement emerged as another key factor influencing learner performance. Teachers reported that many parents showed limited interest in their children's education, which negatively affected motivation and academic self-esteem. Studies affirm that active parental engagement contributes to improved learner performance and fosters positive attitudes toward education (Ndwandwe, 2023). Schools should develop policies that encourage parental participation, including regular parent-teacher meetings and workshops on how parents can support learning at home.

Conclusion

With this study we explored factors contributing to poor academic performance among learners in the Intermediate Phase at a primary school in Klerksdorp. The focus of the study was on several themes towards identifying the factors contributing to learners' poor academic performance. The following themes were factors contributing to poor academic achievement among learners in the Intermediate Phase: the support that performing poorly learners need to enhance their academic performance; the support that teachers require from subject advisors with regard to differentiated teaching strategies to improve teaching and learning; and, how teachers can effectively use LTSM to enhance learners' academic performance.

The study also outlined some recommendations on how teachers can go about selecting suitable teaching methods that will encourage learners' participation and concentration to enhance good academic performance. In responding to the research question about curriculum adaptation, it was suggested that the number of subjects in Grade 4 be reduced, as the number of subjects is excessive and challenging, which leads to poor academic performance. We conclude by recommending that continuous INSET and professional support will equip teachers with the necessary skills and knowledge to deal with

their frustrations and doubts, will empower them to select the most suitable teaching strategies to meet learners' needs and, thus, improve learners' academic performance.

Authors' Contributions

MM wrote the manuscript. MC conducted the interviews and did the data analyses. Both authors reviewed the final manuscript.

Notes

- i. This article is based on the doctoral thesis of Mokwena Morelle.
- ii. Published under a Creative Commons Attribution Licence.
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