



School Community Responses to the Impact of Overcrowding, Subject Streaming, and Systemic Challenges in a South African Township School

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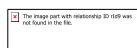
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ABSTRACT

Overcrowding, subject streaming, and broader systemic challenges are persistent issues in many township schools across South Africa. This study aimed to examine how these factors shape teaching, learning, and learner pathways in a South African township school. Using a qualitative research design, the study collected data through semi-structured interviews with 14 participants, including the deputy principal, departmental heads, and grade 12 teachers. Interview guides served as the primary research instrument, and thematic analysis was used to analyze the data. Drawing on interviews with participants and grounded in educational theories that guide classroom management in diverse contexts, the findings reveal that while subject streaming is intended to support differentiated instruction, it often intensifies overcrowding in certain subjects, limits access to gateway subjects, and reinforces existing learner inequalities. Educators also experience increased workloads due to large class sizes and limited resources. The study concludes that although subject streaming offers some instructional efficiencies, its unintended consequences undermine equity and educational quality. A holistic reconsideration of placement practices, resource allocation, and system-level support is therefore necessary to promote fair learning opportunities in South African township schools.



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INTRODUCTION

Overcrowded classrooms are a persistent challenge in South African township schools, where limited resources and infrastructure often compromise the quality of education (Spaull, 2019). Some schools adopt subject streaming to manage large learner populations, grouping students based on their academic abilities (Bosco & Wandela, 2024). While proponents argue that streaming can improve learning efficiency, critics warn of the potential for deepening social and academic divides (Luo & Gardner, 2023; Maharaj & Zareey, 2022).

Learners can choose the subjects they want to specialize in; it may enhance their motivation and improve the overall learning experience. However, several challenges must be addressed in subject-streaming arrangements in overcrowded classrooms (Dube, 2020). One of the critical challenges is the lack of resources and infrastructure in schools serving low-resource communities. Limited classroom space and a shortage of teaching materials make it difficult to recognize the classroom and implement mainstreaming effectively. Recent studies reveal that subject streaming can unintentionally reinforce inequalities among learners, as students with lower prior achievement often receive less attention and fewer opportunities for advanced learning. Furthermore, overcrowded classrooms increase teachers' workload and hinder the



effectiveness of differentiated instruction (Mzimela et al., 2025; Gqwabaza, 2025; Graham, 2023; de Jager, 2023; West & Meier, 2020). Educational policy frameworks emphasize the importance of implementing supportive strategies, such as targeted teacher training programs and equitable resource allocation, to address these challenges and enhance learning outcomes in schools (Gqwabaza, 2025; Gustaffson, 2019).

Another challenge is the availability of qualified teachers. In South African township schools, qualified teachers are scarce, and those available often have limited subject-specific skills. This further complicates the implementation of subject-streaming arrangements for teachers. Furthermore, according to Mamabolo et al. (2023), the diversity in teaching styles and approaches among different teachers can also create challenges in subject-streaming classrooms. Each teacher may have a unique way of delivering lessons and interacting with students. This can sometimes lead to inconsistent teaching methods, making it harder for students to adapt to different teaching styles and requiring expertise in the specific subjects they teach. Despite these challenges, the study conducted by Chisango and Morongwe (2021) in a community school showed promising results regarding learner engagement. The learners in the study displayed high levels of involvement and participation despite the limitations in teaching quality. This suggests that, given the right environment and support, learners can actively participate in their learning, even in overcrowded classrooms.

Overall, subject-streaming arrangements can potentially address some issues faced in low-resource schools, such as discipline problems and a lack of motivation. However, careful planning, resource allocation, and teacher training are essential for successfully implementing subject streaming in overcrowded classrooms. By empowering learners and providing them with choices and opportunities for specialization (Tapala et al., 2021), we can create a more conducive learning environment in South African township schools and enhance the overall educational experience for students. If the schools can do so, the impact of the significant class size problem in such settings could be partially resolved. Unlike other studies, this paper examines the combined impact of overcrowding, subject streaming, and systemic issues in a township secondary school, a context that has received limited attention in South African basic education schooling scholarship. The existing research primarily focuses on specific aspects, such as curriculum differentiation or resource constraints. At the same time, this paper incorporates insights from teachers and departmental heads to provide a comprehensive view of how these elements interact and influence teaching methods and student outcomes.

This paper's central research question is, how do overcrowding, subject streaming, and broader systemic challenges affect teaching and learning in a South African township school? Subject streaming, also known as curriculum differentiation, involves placing learners into separate classes for specific subjects based on their academic performance, perceived ability, or other institutional criteria. While intended to enhance learning by catering to different learner needs, this practice remains highly contested. Subject streaming can inadvertently reinforce educational inequalities and strain teaching and learning conditions when implemented in under-resourced and overcrowded schools.

In many South African public secondary schools, particularly those in township settings, overcrowding is not an imagined concern but a daily reality. It often intersects with subject streaming in complex ways, compounding challenges already posed by limited infrastructure, high learner-to-teacher ratios, heavy workloads, and rigid curriculum demands. Despite its prevalence, the relationship between subject streaming, overcrowding, and learner academic performance remains underexplored in South African scholarly literature. This article addresses this gap by exploring how subject streaming contributes to overcrowding in specific subject areas and how these dynamics, in turn, impact both learner outcomes and teacher efficacy. The township school at the center of this case study has reported this convergence of challenges as a persistent and pressing issue, warranting closer academic scrutiny.



The objectives of this study are to (i) explore how the school community responds to the subject streaming and the effects of overcrowding on teaching and learning in a South African township school, (ii) examine the challenges teachers face when attempting to address subject streaming arrangements, and (iii) identify strategies that could be used to enhance learner engagement and equity in under-resourced and overcrowded classrooms. This study is significant in that it provides practical insights for teachers and policymakers, highlighting ways to improve instructional practices, promote equity, and optimize learning outcomes in overcrowded South African township schools. By examining these pressing challenges in the South African basic education system, this paper aims to enhance the understanding of how subject streaming can be implemented more effectively to mitigate unintended consequences.

This section examines the literature on subject streaming, overcrowding, and other issues related to the lack of resources and systemic challenges that contribute to a steady decline in performance. These are discussed as follows: The subject streaming, overcrowding, instructional resources and support material, progression policy, learners' performance, and motivation.

The streaming issue has a significant impact on school performance in South African townships and rural areas. Subject streaming is a widely used educational strategy in which learners at the same grade level are grouped into different streams or subject tracks based on their academic performance and, in some cases, other contextual factors (Mahende, 2021; Baidoo-Anu, 2022). Typically, teachers assess learners' academic achievements to determine their placement into streams that reflect their cognitive capabilities and learning needs (Mahende, 2021). The rationale behind this approach is to create homogeneous learning environments that can be tailored in terms of instructional style and curriculum pace to match students' abilities better (Brandt et al., 2019).

Streaming, also known as tracking, setting, sorting, or class assignment, is a practice employed in various education systems worldwide (Baidoo-Anu, 2022). While proponents argue that streaming can address differentiated learning needs and improve academic performance by targeting instruction, critics raise concerns about its broader social and psychological implications. Specifically, research indicates that subject streaming often reinforces existing academic disparities, exacerbates social inequalities, and may have a negative impact on students' psychosocial development and sense of belonging (Baidoo-Anu, 2022).

Evidence from Ghana suggests that students placed in lower streams tend to experience diminished self-esteem and reduced academic self-efficacy. In Baidoo-Anu's (2022) study, eight out of ten learners reported feelings of inferiority and a lack of confidence in their academic abilities when assigned to what were perceived as lower-tier streams. Similarly, Matavire et al. (2013) argue that although streaming is often introduced to support learner development, it frequently produces the opposite effect. Their study found that streaming led to unequal distribution of school resources, with more qualified teachers, better classroom conditions, and textbooks being allocated disproportionately to high-ability groups. This practice fosters competition and resentment among staff and learners while ignoring the emotional and academic needs of those relegated to the so-called low-ability classes.

From a social justice perspective, streaming can result in systemic marginalization. Learners in lower streams are often stigmatized and may internalize negative perceptions of their academic worth (Baidoo-Anu, 2022). These experiences can profoundly influence their aspirations, career goals, and long-term educational outcomes (Mahende, 2021). For instance, in the Tanzanian education system, students in Form Two are evaluated through national assessments and subsequently placed into one of three subject streams—science, commerce, or social science—by Form Three and Four (Mahende, 2021). While the model aims to align learners with subject areas suited to their strengths, it often limits opportunities for those in less prestigious streams.



In the South African context, earlier research by Chisaka and Vakalisa (2006) similarly noted the detrimental impact of streaming on students assigned to lower-ability classes, who were frequently overlooked and under-supported. As such, while subject streaming may present instructional advantages in theory, its implementation often exacerbates educational inequities and undermines efforts to create inclusive and empowering learning environments for all learners.

Overcrowding in schools refers to a situation where the number of learners in a classroom exceeds the available physical, human, and material resources, thereby straining infrastructure, instructional delivery, and teacher capacity (Ntsala et al., 2021). It is most understood as occurring when learner numbers surpass the structural capacity of classrooms, preventing effective teaching and impeding learners' ability to achieve academic success (Ntsala et al., 2021).

In South Africa, overcrowding is particularly prevalent in no-fee public schools (quintiles 1–3), where persistent shortages of qualified teachers and inadequate infrastructure compromise the learning environment (West & Meier, 2020). Despite national benchmarks, such as the Education Labour Relations Council (ELRC) and the World Bank's recommended learner-teacher ratio of 1:40, this figure refers to the average number of learners per educator across a school or educational system, rather than the actual class size (Ntsala et al., 2021). Many classrooms exceed this ratio, creating highly congested and unmanageable teaching environments.

Historical and policy developments have also contributed to the rise in enrollment figures. Following South Africa's democratic transition in 1994, the country committed itself to global education initiatives such as the Dakar Framework for Action (2000), which emphasized basic education to alleviate poverty. Similarly, international campaigns led by organizations such as the World Bank and UNICEF promoted free and compulsory primary education, abolishing school fees in many countries across the Global South (Ntsala et al., 2021). Initiatives like Universal Primary Education (UPE) were designed to increase access to schooling, but they also triggered rapid enrollment surges without corresponding investment in infrastructure or teacher development.

In the current democratic era, overcrowding remains a systemic challenge in South African education. The problem is compounded by interlinked socio-economic factors such as poverty, rural underdevelopment, limited public funding, high population growth, and the enduring spatial inequalities inherited from apartheid (du Plessis & Letshwene, 2020). These systemic conditions disproportionately affect historically marginalized communities, where schools are often under-resourced and overburdened.

The implications of overcrowded classrooms are far-reaching. Large class sizes reduce teacher effectiveness by challenging classroom behavior, providing individualized attention, and engagingly delivering the curriculum (Khan & Iqbal, 2012; Mankgele, 2023; Tshangana et al., 2023). Research by Ncontsa and Shumba (2013) highlights how overcrowding compromises school safety, noting that teachers often struggle to maintain discipline in overcrowded spaces, with misbehavior going undetected and unaddressed. These challenges are particularly acute for novice teachers, who frequently lack the classroom management experience to navigate such environments.

Furthermore, overcrowded classrooms increase teacher stress, emotional exhaustion, and burnout (Vakili, Vakili, Abbasi, & Masoudi, 2024). As learner numbers rise, meaningful interactions between educators and learners diminish, weakening student engagement and learning outcomes. To mitigate these effects, it becomes imperative that teachers, especially those new to the profession, develop adaptive capacities such as teacher agency, resilience, and strategic classroom management skills. These competencies are crucial for maintaining instructional quality and fostering inclusive, supportive learning environments, even with limited resources and high learner-to-teacher ratios.



Teaching and learning resources encompass three fundamental components: material resources, physical infrastructure, and human capital. However, existing literature reveals that these essential elements are often inadequately provided in ordinary public schools across South Africa (Molaudzi, 2020; du Plessis & Mestry, 2019; Ndimande & Neville, 2018). This persistent lack of adequate resources has long been a concern for educators, as poor access to teaching and learning materials continues to obstruct meaningful political, social, and economic transformation across many African countries (Melikhaya & Mantlana, 2020).

Secondary education depends heavily on various human and material inputs to function effectively. However, in many state-owned schools, especially in rural villages, these critical resources remain limited or absent (du Plessis & Mestry, 2019), disrupting smooth classroom functioning and hampering educational progress (Melikhaya & Mantlana, 2020). As Molaudzi (2020) notes, well-resourced schools are more likely to offer engaging, meaningful, and relevant learning experiences, which improve both learner attendance and academic outcomes. Conversely, resource-deprived schools frequently face high absenteeism and poor learner performance, perpetuating cycles of inequality.

Empirical evidence further highlights that the schools most affected by resource scarcity are those in rural and marginalized communities (Melikhaya & Mantlana, 2020; Mkhize & Davids, 2023; du Plessis & Mestry, 2019). This problem is exacerbated by a general paucity of research focusing on the unique educational challenges faced by rural schools, leaving the plight of these communities underdocumented and underaddressed (Mkhize & Davids, 2023).

The consequences of this inequality are far-reaching. As Ndimande and Neville (2018) observe, many urban parents relocate their children to better-resourced suburban schools in order to pursue higher-quality education. However, this shift often introduces a new set of problems, including racial discrimination and cultural prejudice, within historically privileged, formerly white schools. Despite three decades of democratic governance, South Africa's education system continues to reflect the spatial and racial inequalities engineered under apartheid. The legacy of apartheid-era education persists in the form of separate and unequal opportunities, particularly disadvantaging Black learners in township and rural schools (Ndimande & Neville, 2018).

This unequal distribution of educational resources makes it difficult for rural schools to attract and retain qualified teachers. The shortage of funding, poor infrastructure, and lack of professional support in these settings deter many educators from accepting or remaining in rural teaching posts (du Plessis & Mestry, 2019). Consequently, rural and township schools remain trapped in a cycle of underperformance, under-resourcing, and neglect, demanding urgent policy attention and sustained investment.

Academic progression remains a contentious issue within the South African education system, eliciting various perspectives and debates among teachers and other key stakeholders. In recent years, South Africa has implemented a progression policy to allow learners to advance to the next grade even if they have not met the minimum promotion requirements. Progression is defined as a learner's movement from one grade to the next, excluding Grade R, even if they do not meet all the academic requirements for promotion (Nkosi & Adebayo, 2021). The policy stipulates that such learners should receive adequate academic support to facilitate successful learning outcomes in the subsequent grade. The broader objectives of the policy are to promote learner dignity, protect self-esteem, and encourage age-appropriate socialization (Nkosi & Adebayo, 2021).

South Africa is not unique in adopting this approach; several other countries have also embraced progression policies shaped by contextual and situational imperatives (Mogale & Malatji, 2023). However, despite its good intentions, implementing the progression policy in South Africa has encountered significant challenges. Mogale and Malatji (2023) found that schools lacked readiness and stakeholders were insufficiently prepared to adopt and implement the policy effectively. Intervention strategies, which were intended to target specifically the



progressed learners, were instead directed broadly at all struggling learners, diluting the intended focus and impact of the policy.

Initially introduced in 2013 and fully implemented by 2015, the policy was envisioned to reduce school dropout rates and address systemic backlogs in the education system (Mogale & Modipane, 2021). However, its improper implementation has arguably undermined these goals. Teachers often struggle to monitor and support advanced learners due to a confluence of longstanding issues, including overcrowded classrooms, excessive workloads, limited learning resources, and behavioral challenges (Nkosi & Adebayo, 2021; Mogale & Modipane, 2021). Many educators perceive the policy as an added burden that exacerbates existing difficulties in the classroom environment.

Crucially, learners promoted through progression policies frequently struggle to cope with the academic demands of the new grade. This is particularly pronounced in foundational areas such as reading and writing, where knowledge gaps are most evident (Nkosi & Adebayo, 2021). The policy heavily relies on educators to provide additional support, yet fails to account for the diverse learning needs of progressed learners, the emotional and cognitive adjustments required, or the sheer volume of learners needing support in any given grade. As Nkosi and Adebayo (2021) emphasize, overcrowding in schools severely limits the ability of educators to offer targeted assistance, particularly in under-resourced schools where teacher-learner ratios are unmanageable.

Additional compounding factors, such as lack of parental involvement, poor learner discipline, and inadequate motivation, further undermine the effectiveness of the progression policy. Erasmus and Fourie (2024) observed a substantial increase in progressed learners within the Gauteng Department of Education between 2017 and 2019. The number rose by 2,088 from 2017 to 2018 and by 3,736 from 2018 to 2019, resulting in an overall increase of 5,824 learners (2.1%) in just three years. This sharp rise raises serious concerns, as many of these learners advance to higher grades without possessing the academic foundation necessary for success at that level.

Consequently, learners are being promoted despite failing to meet the minimum criteria for progression, creating a false impression of improved educational outcomes. As Erasmus and Fourie (2024) argue, this practice leads to a misrepresentation of academic performance, artificially lowering failure rates and inflating the matriculation pass rate. In doing so, the progression policy may unintentionally compromise educational quality, deepen systemic inequalities, and obscure the urgent need for broader structural reforms in the education system.

A complex interplay of systemic, socio-economic, and educational factors influences learner performance and motivation in South African schools. Learner performance is closely linked to motivation and is defined as the degree to which a person engages in learning activities expended on tasks. Motivation can enhance achievement, while cognitive factors may be the most potent determinants of performance (Dandala, 2013). Work-related behavior can include any type of behavior in school, such as homework, exams, and classwork, all of which are key elements of educational performance.

Motivation, on the other hand, can refer to many things. However, a proper definition is a set of energetic forces that originate within and beyond an individual's being to initiate work-related behavior and determine its form, direction, intensity, and duration (Naidoo, 2004).

According to Mail & Guardian (March 11, 2025), a significant concern is the deficiency in early literacy and numeracy skills. Over 80% of South African 10-year-olds cannot read for meaning, placing the country at the bottom among 43 nations in the 2021 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study. In response, the government has introduced a compulsory Grade R year and is working to integrate early childhood development centers into the Department of Basic Education. However, these initiatives face challenges related to funding and implementation.



According to Smaill (2017), socio-economic conditions significantly impact students' academic performance. These conditions, which include parental involvement, poverty, and school infrastructure, result in low levels of educational performance. Parents often do not attend meetings or respond to correspondence from schools. This failure to engage in behaviors expected of managing agents in a principal-agent relationship affects educational performance levels. Teacher underperformance arises from limited accountability, which in turn stems from a failure to comply with the terms of the model. On the other hand, Chili (2006) emphasizes that poverty is crucial in exacerbating the challenge of learner performance. Many learners from poverty-stricken communities are at a higher risk of dropping out of school than their counterparts from affluent areas.

A study by Mafukata (2016) on the complexities shaping learners' performance in physical science established that learners' performance was influenced by selected constraints on the parts of learners, teachers, principals, and district officials. These constraints were complex, involving emotional upheaval, inadequate resources, and poverty, which were ranked the highest in terms of influence and prevalence among a long list of other complex constraints. Resource availability in our schools directly reflects on the functionality of the school and classroom environment. A lack of infrastructure, such as toilets, classrooms, teaching and learning resources, desks, and tables, significantly impacts learner performance. Teaching and learning science and mathematics are particularly challenging in rural high schools that lack laboratories, multimedia, and even textbooks (Jantjies & Joy, 2012). Therefore, this imbalance can lower overall academic performance and create challenges in resource allocation, teacher workload, and curriculum development.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design



Figure 1. The qualitative case study design

This study employs a qualitative case study approach to investigate the impact of subject streaming, overcrowding, and other systemic issues in a South African township school located in the Gauteng Province. A case study is a common example often used to illustrate a broader concept. It may focus on a single defined system, such as a child, a group, a class, a school, or a community (Cohen et al., 2007). It provides an in-depth description of the setting or individuals involved, followed by a thematic or issue-based data analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Contexts are distinct and ever-evolving; therefore, case studies examine and document the



intricate, changing interactions between events, human relationships, and other elements within a particular situation (Cohen et al., 2007). A case study design is suitable as it allows for an in-depth exploration of the specific, contextualised experiences and challenges associated with subject streaming, particularly about issues such as classroom overcrowding and academic performance. This approach facilitates a comprehensive understanding of how subject streaming impacts teaching and learning practices within the school environment.

Research Setting

The research was conducted at a township school selected due to its steady decline in academic performance over the past five years. Notably, the school's matriculation pass rate dropped from a high of 95% in 2019 to 67.9% in 2023, with variations in the number of students progressing without achieving the required pass mark from grade 11. The school adopted subject streaming as a strategy to support struggling learners, making it a pertinent case for examining the unintended effects of this practice. The study examines how subject streaming affects class sizes, resource allocation, and overall educational outcomes, shedding light on the complexities of this educational intervention.

Table 1. The school's matriculation pass rate

Year	Pass rate	No wrote	Not achieved	Progressed
2023	67.9%	81	55	13
2022	78.7%	141	111	3
2021	87.1%	85	74	8
2020	77.7%	79	61	27
2019	95%	40	38	27
2018	93.4%	61	57	25

Participants

Purposeful sampling is the primary sampling method in qualitative research, designed to select cases that offer valuable insights into the main research questions. This information-rich case yields a deep understanding of essential issues. Thus, purposeful sampling entails choosing key informants with specialized knowledge of the studied topic (Lodico et al., 2006). The participants included a deputy principal, five departmental heads, and several teachers from the school. Purposeful sampling was used to select participants who could provide meaningful insights into the practice of subject streaming and its consequences. Only teachers directly impacted by issues related to overcrowding, as well as those teaching subjects affected by streaming practices, were considered, ensuring that the data gathered was relevant to the study's objectives.

Data Collection

Qualitative research employs techniques such as observations, interviews, and document analysis to collect data, with findings typically presented in a narrative or descriptive format (Lodico et al., 2006). Data was collected through open-ended interviews, allowing participants to freely express their views and experiences regarding subject streaming. This method provided the flexibility to probe deeper into responses, facilitating a more nuanced understanding of how streaming impacts teaching and learning conditions. Each interview was semi-structured and guided by core questions; however, additional follow-up questions were permitted based on the participants' responses. The open-ended interviews with teachers focused on their perspectives on the effectiveness and challenges of subject streaming, their experiences with classroom overcrowding resulting from streaming practices, and observations of learner engagement and performance in streamed versus non-streamed subjects. For example, the interview guide included questions such as, "What challenges do you face in school that might affect your overall performance?" "Can you describe how subject streaming



affects learner participation in your classes?" and "What strategies do you use to manage learners with varying academic abilities in the same subject?" These questions allowed participants to reflect on both practical and systemic aspects of subject streaming and overcrowding.

Interviews with the deputy principal, departmental heads, and teachers provided insights into the school's policy decisions and management strategies concerning subject streaming. These participants also discussed broader educational challenges faced by the school, including Grade 12 performance and resource limitations. Furthermore, documents from the Gauteng Department of Education (GDE) were analyzed to corroborate and enrich the data gathered from interviews with the school's staff members.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to identify, analyze, and report patterns within the data. Interview transcripts were initially coded to identify recurring themes related to subject streaming and its associated challenges. Codes were then organized into broader categories, focusing on overcrowding, teaching challenges, and educational outcomes. This analytical approach enabled a systematic examination of the intended and unintended consequences of subject streaming, highlighting areas where this practice either supports or hinders the school's educational goals.

Ethical Considerations

The researchers prioritized ethical integrity throughout the research process. Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant authorities to ensure adherence to research ethics guidelines. All participants were fully informed of the study's purpose, assured of their anonymity, and provided with the option to withdraw at any time without consequence. Informed consent was obtained before each interview was conducted with participants, and all data were kept confidential and securely stored in a password-protected device. To maintain confidentiality and in accordance with ethical guidelines, the school's name, the name of the township where the school is located, and the names of all participants are kept anonymous in this study.

Theoretical framework

This study is grounded in educational theories to critically examine how systemic structures, such as overcrowded classrooms, subject streaming, progression policies, and curriculum design, affect teaching practices and learners' outcomes in South African township schools. The theoretical framework integrates perspectives from Differentiated Instruction (Tomlinson, 2001), Critical Pedagogy (Freire, 1970), and sociological theories of education, particularly those focusing on class and structural reproduction (Bourdieu, 1973; Robinson & Rusznyak, 2020).

Differentiated Instruction and Learner Diversity

Tomlinson's (2001) theory of differentiated instruction provides a pedagogical lens for addressing learner variability by tailoring teaching to students' readiness, interests, and learner profiles. In overcrowded classrooms, however, implementing DI becomes increasingly difficult. DI distinguishes levels of understanding from surface knowledge to critical synthesis, suggesting that equitable learning outcomes require instructional flexibility. However, in practice, high learner-teacher ratios can limit the extent to which such differentiation is feasible.

Subject: Streaming and Educational Equity

Subject streaming, where learners are grouped based on perceived academic ability, reflects broader ideologies about merit, intelligence, and worth. Critical perspectives challenge the assumption that streaming promotes efficiency or performance. Matlock (2022) introduces the term 'Pygmalionism' to describe the implicit bias teachers may hold, which affects learner



expectations and outcomes, particularly for students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds. This aligns with the Pygmalion Effect, which suggests that teacher expectations can have a positive or negative impact on student achievement.

In addition, the assumption that learners in STEM and commerce streams are more capable can reproduce class-based privilege, especially when assessment systems correlate performance with innate ability (Robinson & Rusznyak, 2020). These concerns are heightened in contexts of overcrowding, where systemic constraints often mask or reinforce underlying social inequalities.

Systemic Constraints: Curriculum, Assessment, and Class Size

Overcrowding, limited resources, and rigid curricular structures intersect to limit effective teaching. Fabriz et al. (2021) argue that class size alone does not determine learning quality; instead, the quality of instruction, especially the capacity to engage learners meaningfully, is central to student success. Policies promoting small class sizes or removing “struggling” students, while appealing on the surface, often divert attention from deeper issues related to curriculum design, teacher support, and institutional inequality.

Furthermore, curriculum design prioritizing high-stakes assessment over contextualized learning worsens the disparities, particularly for learners already marginalized by streaming or large class sizes (Bourdieu, 1973). Such structures often legitimize the privileged's success by cloaking systemic advantages in the language of “merit.”

Integrative Perspective

By integrating these theoretical lenses, this article positions itself within a critical inquiry into how systemic challenges, such as overcrowding, subject streaming, and progression policy, interact with pedagogical practice and educational equity. The framework highlights the tension between ideals of differentiated, inclusive education and the realities of resource-constrained schools. Ultimately, the study calls for rethinking policies and practices that privilege efficiency over equity and fail to recognize the structural barriers learners face.

Discussions of Findings

The case study under discussion experienced a steady decline in performance, which could be attributed to numerous challenges. The discussion integrates relevant insights from the reviewed literature. By blending the participants’ voices with the supporting literature, the analysis can provide a rich, multi-faceted understanding of the research question. Using the thematic analysis to address the question of “How do *overcrowding, subject streaming, and broader systemic challenges affect teaching and learning in a South African township school?*” the following seven themes emerged from the data collected with the participants: Subject streaming, Overcrowding, Progression policy, Learner performance and motivation, Instructional resources and support material/teaching and Learning resource material these themes are discussed in detail below.

Streaming

Regarding the streaming issue, the teachers and departmental heads had different views on streaming. Some expressed their views, arguing that streaming allows learners to choose their future career paths. The other teacher stated that the downside of subject streaming has resulted in some subject streams having fewer resources and being more ignored than others, giving an example of science streams versus social sciences. The quotes provided by the teachers will shed light on their views on subject streaming.

“Subject streaming gives learners a chance to choose early in life to do what they will be in future. Most jobs require math and science skills” [HoD 1, 2024].



"I struggle with learning and teacher support materials in my social sciences stream because I do not teach technology and science streams." [Teacher 3,2024].

Teachers in the above assertions concur with the arguments in the literature that subject streaming is a widely used educational strategy wherein learners at the same grade level are grouped into different streams or subject biases based on their academic performance and, in some cases, other contextual factors (Mahende, 2021; Baidoo-Anu, 2022). However, sometimes the unintended consequence of subject streaming is perpetuating unequal resource supply to different subject streams.

Agreeing with Teacher 2's views, Chisaka and Vakalisa (2006) similarly noted, in the South African context, the detrimental impact of streaming on students assigned to lower-ability classes, who were often overlooked and under-supported. Given the challenges posed by subject streaming, it is essential to approach the issue carefully, considering the context in which streaming occurs and its consequences. Streaming presents a significant challenge that demands thoughtful consideration to enhance pass rates and achieve high-quality outcomes. The fundamental question is whether quality and quantity align with the school's goals and departmental objectives. The recent scholarship also supports teacher perspectives in that, while subject streaming is intended to support differentiated instruction, it often reinforces stratification within schools, particularly in under-resourced contexts (Mahende, 2021; Baidoo-Anu, 2022).

Overcrowding

Overcrowding is a challenge, especially in the developing world, of which South Africa is a part. It became a common challenge for the teachers at the school, who complained about this challenge. Teachers vented their frustrations in the following ways.

"The numbers in my class are too much, which affects the learners, as some are disruptive".
[Teacher 4,2024].

"I am always exhausted because I must mark all assessments that I give to the learners and there is always no time" [Teacher 3,2024].

"Some learners come from broken homes and their behaviour affects the majority of the class."
[Teacher 5, 2024].

From these teachers' perspectives, it is possible to identify the various challenges posed by overcrowding in schools and its impact on teaching and learning. The overcrowding affects teaching and learning and adversely influences learners' progression to higher grades. As indicated in the literature (West & Meier, 2020), this problem is exacerbated by a shortage of teachers, inadequate infrastructure, and limited educational budgets. The recent social challenges have permeated the school environment, as [teacher 5] alluded to the influence of societal factors on student behavior. From the teacher's assertion, it can also be argued that overcrowding creates numerous mental health issues and an uncomfortable environment. This is supported by Vakili et al. (2024), who argue that overcrowded classrooms lead to increased teacher stress, emotional exhaustion, and burnout. These findings align with global evidence showing that overcrowding negatively influences learner behavior, academic achievement, and teacher efficacy (Vakili et al., 2024; Zaman et al., 2023; Osai et al., 2021). In the South African context, Mankgele (2023) and Tshangana et al. (2023) argue that overcrowding exacerbates disciplinary challenges and heightens teacher workload, ultimately undermining the quality of teaching and learning.

Instructional Resources and Support Material

Concerning the teacher's views on the importance of teaching and learning resource material towards quality education, there was a general agreement that these are pivotal for effective teaching and learning. Teachers expressed that a lack of learning and teaching support materials in the schools affects the quality of education offered and learners' progression.



Teachers provided the following quotations to shed light on their experiences regarding the challenges of insufficient teaching and learning resources in township schools.

"The school does not have enough reading materials for learners and sometimes the books arrive towards the end of the year." [Teacher 3, 2024]

"The writing boards in other classes are broken; you cannot write full sentences on them." [Teacher 1, 2024].

The teachers recognized that education is compromised and teaching and learning are hindered at schools in township areas. These views concur with Molaudzi (2020), du Plessis & Mestry (2019), and Ndimande & Neville (2018), who argue that persistent lack of adequate resources has long been a source of concern for educators, as poor access to teaching and learning materials continues to obstruct meaningful political, social, and economic transformation across many African countries. The most affected schools in the context of South Africa are rural areas where Black people are a majority. Education governance, in general, plays a crucial role. Education, in general, has a role in providing educational resources. In the post-1994 era, instances have arisen where education authorities have been found to be lacking in providing schools with resources on time (Ndimande & Neville, 2018). From the teacher's perspective, the lack of resources at schools leads to unequal education opportunities, as is the case between rural and urban, white and Black schools. As Molaudzi (2020) indicated, well-resourced schools are more likely to offer engaging, meaningful, and relevant learning experiences, improving learner attendance and academic outcomes. Conversely, resource-deprived schools frequently face high absenteeism and poor learner performance, perpetuating cycles of inequality.

Progression Policy

The findings from the interviews highlight that the progression policy is implemented in South African schools to facilitate learners' academic progression. However, the school management and teachers are unhappy as the learners have not progressed by mastering the knowledge from the previous grade. This is viewed as fast-tracking undeserving learners, potentially contributing to their unemployability after formal schooling. The participants shared their views on progression and how it affects teaching and learning at schools in the following:

"Because some learners are pushed to the next grade. They tend not to listen to us teachers, as they know they will pass." [Teacher 6].

Without the proper resources, overcrowded classes, and measures to encourage good behavior, the progression leads to the unintended consequence of learners committing less to their studies. The view shared above concurs with Mogale and Malatji (2023), who found that schools lacked readiness and stakeholders were insufficiently prepared to adopt and implement the policy effectively.

"It is a policy, it must be implemented, although at times I feel that it discourages working hard by learners. Teachers are unhappy sometimes, but it must be implemented" [Deputy Principal, 2024].

The deputy principal's response suggests that the policy on progression implementation has been rushed, although the intentions are good. These concerns are echoed by Mogale and Modipane (2021), who found that progression without adequate support leads to cumulative learning backlogs, which widen as learners advance through grades. Teachers often bear the burden of remedying these gaps, despite already strained working conditions (Mkhize & Davids, 2023). The varying challenges that schools face, such as inadequate infrastructure and urban and rural issues, are often overlooked. These assertions are supported by Nkosi & Adebayo (2021) and Mogale & Modipane (2021), who argue that the progression has not been implemented and is undermining policy goals. They argue that teachers often struggle to monitor and support advanced learners due to longstanding issues, including overcrowded classrooms, excessive workloads, limited learning resources, and behavioral challenges.



"With the issue of progressing some of the learners, you will find that when the next train those people, they have a gap... when you reach grade 11 or 12... that is very difficult." [HoD 2, 2024].

As previously mentioned, the progression policy was intended to assist learners who face disadvantages due to insufficient resources and other educational challenges. However, as noted by the school management team member above, progression has become more of a challenge than a solution. The issue is that learners advance to the next grade without having fully mastered the material from the previous grade. The experiences of teachers and the departmental heads regarding learners' progression concur with Nkosi and Adebayo's (2021) arguments. They argue that learners promoted through progression policies frequently struggle to meet the academic demands of the new grade. The policy heavily relies on educators to provide additional support, yet fails to account for the diverse learning needs of progressed learners, the emotional and cognitive adjustments required, or the sheer volume of learners needing support in any specific grade. Overall, teachers' experiences reveal a need to revise the implementation of the learner progression policy, as it currently disadvantages the learners it was intended to help.

Learner's Performance and Motivation

The interviews underscore the importance of motivating learners to excel academically. There is a consensus that the environment from which learners come and that of the school play a pivotal role towards learners performing better at school. One of the teachers emphasized this point, stating:

Some learners come from uncaring homes; their parents do not care about their education. You call your parents to talk to them about the child, and they refuse to come. Some learners come from child-headed homes where there are no elders and they do as they please [Teacher 2, 2024].

The teacher's response suggests that the socio-economic background of learners is crucial and determines how they perform at school. The other teacher further supports the perspective and includes motivation:

Some parents are uneducated and do not see the importance of school. There are no role models in the families; the role models are people who drop out of school. Due to their lavish lifestyle, these people are usually idolised in the communities. Sometimes, you ask a learner what they are going to be as an adult, but most of the time, they do not know because nothing motivates them. [Teacher 1, 2024].

The teacher's position reflects the lack of motivation from the learners themselves and how this is detrimental to their getting a quality education. There is a common understanding that learners who lack role models in their family or community often lack the drive to excel further at school. Naidoo (2024) expounds on this by defining motivation as a set of energetic forces that originate both within and beyond an individual's being to initiate work-related behavior and to determine its form, direction, intensity, and duration. The implications are that when there are 'energetic forces' within the person and 'beyond' (socially), there is no inclination to do better at school.

On the other hand, Smaill (2017) concurs with the teachers that socio-economic background must be conducive for the learners to perform well. He further argues that these conditions, which include parental involvement, poverty, and school infrastructure, result in low levels of educational performance. Parents often do not attend meetings or respond to correspondence from schools. This failure to engage in behaviors expected of managing agents in a principal-agent relationship devastates educational performance levels. Teacher underperformance arises from limited accountability, which in turn stems from a failure to comply with the terms of the model. Chili (2006) emphasizes the impact of extreme poverty in society, which has a terrible effect on learners' performance at school. This resonates with research linking socio-economic



conditions to schooling outcomes. This body of knowledge argues that without proper parental involvement, stable homes, and community support structures, learner motivation deteriorates, resulting in poor academic performance (Mabena, 2025; Chikoko & Mthembu, 2021; Reddy & Fradiji, 2020).

CONCLUSION

The study focused on the views and experiences of teachers regarding how overcrowding, subject streaming, and broader systemic challenges affect teaching and learning in a township school in South Africa. The study found that despite interventions aimed at addressing overcrowding, it remains a significant challenge in township and rural schools. Furthermore, subject streaming is obstructed by systemic processes that ultimately disadvantage learners. The results indicate that these factors have a negative impact on teaching and learning, particularly in schools serving low-income, previously disadvantaged communities. Nonetheless, several factors, such as an improved socio-economic background of learners, more teaching and learning resources, manageable class sizes, and collaboration between district management and schools, will help ensure that effective teaching and learning occur at the township school. The study enhances our understanding of how teachers perceive the challenges that affect teaching and learning from their perspective. However, a significant limitation is the limited number of schools participating, as well as the fact that the research was confined to the Gauteng province.

Recommendations

The recommendations are based on the themes identified in the collected data. In order to ensure effective teaching and learning in township schools, it is imperative to address the persistent issue of overcrowding. This challenge severely hampers individual learner attention and overall classroom management. Therefore, the Department of Basic Education should increase the number of employed teachers to reduce the learner-teacher ratio. Furthermore, constructing additional schools and classrooms (in already existing schools) should be prioritized in high-density areas to enable better spatial distribution of learners and manageable teaching environments.

In relation to curriculum implementation, the current approach to subject streaming should be revised. While the emphasis on STEM subjects is understandable given their global relevance, this focus must not marginalize other essential subjects, particularly the social sciences and arts. A balanced allocation of resources is necessary to support all academic streams equitably, ensuring that learners with diverse needs and interests receive encouragement and the necessary tools to succeed.

Learner performance and motivation are closely linked to social and emotional environments. Creating a supportive and inspiring environment is essential for learners to reach their full potential. Parental involvement should be actively encouraged, as it can potentially improve learners' outcomes. In addition, educational administrators, universities, and business entities should collaborate with schools to organize career guidance programs for all academic streams, not only focusing on STEM and commerce streams. These initiatives would raise awareness of available opportunities and enhance learner motivation by linking academic activities with real-world aspirations.

Lastly, access to adequate and effective teaching and learning support materials is non-negotiable for the quality of teaching and learning. Previously disadvantaged schools in South Africa often suffer severe instructional material shortages. This article recommends that targeted efforts be made to ensure the timely and equitable provision of LTSMs. This requires the political will of those entrusted with administrative and leadership positions. The right to quality, equitable education and access must always be protected.



Implications for Policy

The findings of this research reveal thought-provoking issues in township schools, including overcrowding, subject streaming, teaching and learning materials, motivation, learner performance, and progression policies. These issues challenge effective teaching and learning, especially in township schools. It has been thirty years since South Africa became a democratic state, but improving education remains a challenge.

For policymakers, these findings present an opportunity to develop directives and frameworks to create a coherent educational system for all types of schools. The research indicates that much is left to chance and that significant discrepancies exist in the perception, interpretation, and implementation of policy mandates. No guidelines are provided for implementing the policies, despite a basic understanding of their tenets. In most cases, teachers, who are the implementers of policies, are often left to interpret them according to their understanding, assumptions, and belief structures. This often results in chaos and negatively impacts teaching and learning in township schools. Lastly, policy formulations must always consider the classroom contexts that exist in various schools across the country.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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