

## Investigating the Confluence of Factors Impacting on Underperformance at Selected Secondary Schools in the Western Cape, South Africa

Amiena Bayat<sup>1</sup>, Wynand Louw<sup>2</sup> and Ravinder Rena<sup>3\*</sup>

<sup>1,3</sup>*Department of Economics; Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences,*

<sup>2</sup>*Institute for Social Development, University of the Western Cape,  
Private Bag X 17, Bellville, South Africa*

*E-mail: <sup>1</sup><amienabayat@telkomsa.net>, <sup>2</sup><jwl@netactive.co.za>, <sup>3</sup><rrena@uwc.ac.za, drravinderrena@gmail.com>*

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**ABSTRACT** The primary focus of this paper is to understand the underlying factors responsible for poor performance of learners at underperforming secondary schools in the Western Cape Province, South Africa, which is manifested amongst others in high rates of grade repetition. In South Africa, underperforming secondary schools are defined by the state as those schools that show a 60% or lower Grade 12 pass rate in the final national examinations. The research methodology consisted of both quantitative and qualitative approaches. The unit of analysis was done on underperforming secondary schools in the Western Cape. The sampling frame consisted of underperforming secondary schools based on the 2009 final national Grade 12 examinations and consisted of 22 (out of 78) secondary schools for which detailed data was collected and analysed. The main research finding is that the high levels of grade repetition at underperforming schools can primarily be related to three inter-related factors; an inappropriate grade promotion policy, school level and socio-economic factors.

### INTRODUCTION

In 1994 South Africa embarked on a new path to democracy after decades of racial segregation. This meant that public (and some private) institutions had to adapt to a raft of legislative measures and dictates aimed at dismantling the institutionalised racism of Apartheid. Bayat et al. (2014) asserted that the education system was earmarked for fundamental change since the schooling system, with its separate schools for White and Black learners not only symbolised but also gave harsh expression to the racial discrimination and inequities that prevailed in the country (Bayat et al. 2014: 183). In its quest to achieve equity, quality and access to education in South Africa, the post-Apartheid government succeeded not only in expanding access to schools for most of the population, but also in the provision of a near universal primary school education in a relatively short period. The

StatsSA confirms that in 2002 the completion rate for primary education for 18 year olds was 89.6%; by 2009 this had increased to 94% (StatsSA 2010: 43).

Despite these achievements, different studies (Taylor 2007a; Taylor 2007b; Fleisch and Shindler 2007; Bayat et al. 2014) show that underperforming secondary schools in South Africa face chronic problems with poor performance which often manifests itself in high rates of grade repetition. In South Africa, an underperforming school is defined as a school failing to achieve a Grade 12 pass rate of more than 60%.

To tackle this problem, a National Strategy for Learner Attainment (NSLA) was developed in 2004, by the National Department of Education. The intention of the NSLA was to integrate a number of different national, provincial and local initiatives into a synergistic mission-directed programme of comprehensive interventions to tackle under-performance at schools in South Africa. This programme consists of a planned and sustained series and set of related operations, projects, activities, strategies and interventions with short and long term objectives of raising learner performance and ensuring improved quality learner achievement in all schools<sup>1</sup>. As part of this programme three strate-

*\*Address for correspondence:*

Prof. Dr. Ravinder Rena  
Department of Economics,  
Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences,  
University of the Western Cape,  
Private Bag: X 17; Robert Sobukwe Road,  
Bellville, South Africa 7535

gic priorities were identified, that is, 1) Teachers, with a focus on training, development and retention, 2) The provision of learning and teaching support material (LTSM) and, 3) increasing the time spent on actual teaching. Despite this initiative, this research suggests that little has changed at underperforming schools.

Additionally, the South African Schools Act No. 84 of 1996 stipulates that “the Head of Department must take all reasonable steps to assist a school in addressing underperformance”. From the documents provided to Equal Education (EE), a national NGO active in the education sector by the WCED, it is clear that there has been no comprehensive, sustained and targeted interventions implemented by the WCED to improve learner performance at these schools. Equal Education states that the WCED must not circumvent its obligation to provide substantive support, and turn instead to the “quick fix” alternative of closure. If the root causes of underperformance are not properly identified, closing a school for underperformance is unlikely to address the problem; it only shifts it to another school.<sup>2</sup>

In the Western Cape in 2006 there were 36 underperforming schools. By 2009 this number increased to 85, accounting for almost 20% of all secondary schools within the province. Despite the introduction of a number of interventions by the Western Cape Education Department (WCED), the number of underperforming schools still stood at 78 at the end of the 2010 school calendar. Most underperforming schools are located in the townships where they manifest many social dysfunctions emanating from the social environment in which they are rooted.

The low level of educational attainment among caregivers, even in households where both biological parents are present, suggests that parents are not able to meaningfully assist learners with homework. For example, 48% of primary breadwinners had completed some secondary schooling whilst only 28% had completed secondary school. This lack of educational attainment of care givers is of particular relevance for Grade 11 and 12 learners as it implies that these learners are often left with little or no educational support apart from the school system.

The underperforming secondary schools in the Western Cape Province are suffering from various factors which include but are not limited to the low socio-economic status of the stu-

dents and their parents which contribute significantly to the underperformance of learners. An attempt is made in this paper to explore various factors that contribute to underperformance at secondary schools in Western Cape Province.

### Research Question

The main research question can be formulated as follows:

- 1) To what extent are “school level” and “out of school” factors responsible for underperformance at secondary schools in the Western Cape Province?

This paper addresses the research question with a particular focus on some of the underlying socio-economic factors that contribute to the underperformance of selected secondary schools in the Western Cape Province of South Africa. By definition, schools are categorized as underperforming if they do not obtain a pass rate of at least 60% in the National Senior Certificate examinations. Underperforming schools are mainly townships schools situated in black neighbourhoods.

### Objectives

- 1) To examine the relationship between repetition rates and adverse social and economic conditions faced by learners at schools.
- 2) To investigate the nature and causes of underperformance of high school learners in the Western Cape Province
- 3) To provide some policy implications to the government with regard to the current promotion of learners at underperforming schools.

As discussed above, poor school performance is a major problem in South Africa. To date the success of intervention strategies that were aimed at turning the situation around in dysfunctional schools have been short lived and were not sustainable in the country despite the fact it spends a major portion of its budget on education.

The aim of this study was to determine the reasons for the underperformance of secondary schools in Western Cape Province. It is essential to determine the reasons for this continuous failure in these schools and the need for intervention programmes if we want to address the

serious problems experienced by the South African education system. The findings of this study highlight the importance of external problems particularly the socio-economic status of the parents of learners attending these schools and support by the districts and the Department of Education in changing the poor performance of these underperformance schools at large.

The paper has been divided into five sections, section two deals with the research design and methodology, section three provides the findings of the research. Section four explain the factors that impact on underperformance of secondary schools, section five deals with the conclusion and provides some pertinent policy recommendations.

### **RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

The research consisted of both quantitative and qualitative approaches (included a combination of field work, interviews, literature and document reviews and desktop analysis). The unit of analysis was underperforming secondary schools in the Western Cape. The sampling frame consisted of underperforming secondary schools based on the 2009 final national Grade 12 examinations and consisted of 22 (out of 78) secondary schools for which detailed data was available at the time of finalising the sampling frame and sample population (Bayat et al. 2014: 186-187). All questionnaires were checked for correct completion by the research team before learners left the group. Data was then captured in Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) before data analysis commenced. The fieldwork was conducted during February and March 2011.

Inferential statistics were used to draw inferences about the population from a sample. The goal of the statistical analysis was to answer 2 questions: 1) Is there a significant effect/association/difference between the variables of interest, that is, socio-economic background and the performance of high school learners? 2) The research also examined if there was an effect/association/difference and how big is was? The study used mean, median, mode and standard deviation techniques.

The sampling frame consisted of all confirmed 22 schools from which 14 schools were

purposefully selected to ensure representation for both ethnic and location (urban/rural) variables. For the purpose of this study, rural schools were defined as all schools outside the Cape metropolitan area (Metro). Of the schools constituting the sampling frame (N=22), 15 were from within (urban) and seven from outside the Cape Metro (rural). Of the 15 urban schools, four were classified as historically Coloured schools and eleven as historically African schools. Of the remaining seven rural schools, six were classified as historically African and one as a historically Coloured school. The remaining seven schools, not included in the sample were listed as replacements in the case of refusals.

The 14 schools which constituted the sample comprised nine urban and five rural schools. Of the nine urban schools, four were classified as historically Coloured schools and five as historically African schools. In the case of the five rural schools, three were historically African and two historically Coloured schools (refer Table 1). Unfortunately, access to some schools was exceedingly difficult as principals of historically African schools were unwilling to partake in the study after being informed of its purpose. After exhausting the replacement list, it became necessary to include additional schools not part of the original sampling frame to complete the fieldwork. Due to time frame constraints, the team still had to settle with the completion of only 12 schools, instead of the intended 14.

The fieldwork was conducted over a period of eight weeks, that is, during February and March 2011. All questionnaires were piloted and amended during the first school visit but given the fact that negotiating access to schools was difficult, and only minor adjustments were necessary after the pilot, it was decided to include these interviews as part of the final dataset.

Three survey instruments (questionnaires) were developed: one for completion by the principals; one for educators; and one for learners. Questionnaires were developed to measure a range of aspects shown by literature to impact on the functionality of a school and thus the academic performance of its learners. Table 2 provides a broader account of the type of questions included in the questionnaires by indicating categories of questions for each respondent group.

**Table 1: Sampling frame**

| Variables                 | Historical ethnic classification of majority learners |      |         |      |          |      |
|---------------------------|---|------|---------|------|----------|------|
|                           | Total   |      | African |      | Coloured |      |
| <i>Area Distribution</i>  |   |      |         |      |          |      |
| Cape Metro                | 15  | 68%  | 11      | 65%  | 4        | 80%  |
| Cape Winelands            | 4   | 18%  | 3       | 18%  | 1        | 20%  |
| Eden and Central Karoo    | 1   | 5%   | 1       | 6%   | 0        | 0%   |
| Overberg                  | 1   | 5%   | 1       | 6%   | 0        | 0%   |
| West Coast                | 1   | 5%   | 1       | 6%   | 0        | 0%   |
| Total                     | 22  | 100% | 17      | 100% | 5        | 100% |
| <i>Sample</i>             |   |      |         |      |          |      |
| Cape Metro                | 9   | 64%  | 6       | 67%  | 3        | 60%  |
| Cape Winelands            | 3   | 21%  | 2       | 22%  | 1        | 20%  |
| Eden and Central Karoo    | 1   | 7%   | 0       | 0%   | 1        | 20%  |
| Overberg                  | 1   | 7%   | 1       | 11%  | 0        | 0%   |
| West Coast                | 0   | 0%   | 0       | 0%   | 0        | 0%   |
| Total                     | 14  | 100% | 9       | 100% | 5        | 100% |
| <i>Sample Realisation</i> |   |      |         |      |          |      |
| Cape Metro                | 7   | 58%  | 3       | 50%  | 4        | 67%  |
| Cape Winelands            | 3   | 25%  | 2       | 33%  | 1        | 17%  |
| Eden and Central Karoo    | 1   | 8%   | 0       | 0%   | 1        | 17%  |
| Overberg                  | 1   | 8%   | 1       | 17%  | 0        | 0%   |
| West Coast                | 0   | 0%   | 0       | 0%   | 0        | 0%   |
| Total                     | 12  | 100% | 6       | 100% | 6        | 100% |

Source: Primary data

**Table 2: Questionnaire categories as for each respondent group**

| Questionnaire category                                      | Respondent group |          |          |
|---|------------------|----------|----------|
|   | Principal        | Teachers | Learners |
| School profile  | ✓                |          |          |
| Individual profile  | ✓                | ✓        | ✓        |
| Human resource management                                   | ✓                | ✓        | ✓        |
| Staff related aspects                                       | ✓                | ✓        |          |
| Learner related aspects                                     | ✓                | ✓        |          |
| School facilities   | ✓                | ✓        | ✓        |
| Curriculum management                                       | ✓                | ✓        | ✓        |
| Curriculum implementation                                   |                  | ✓        |          |
| Parental and other community involvement                    | ✓                | ✓        | ✓        |
| School governance and management                            | ✓                | ✓        |          |
| General questions (for example, testing future perspective) |                  |          | ✓        |

Educators were randomly selected from staff lists provided by the school, with two educators selected for each grade offered by the school. Learners were randomly selected from class lists provided by the school with eight learners selected from each grade. The total numbers of questionnaires completed were: 11 principal questionnaires, 84 teacher questionnaires and 436 learner questionnaires. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the School Management Team (SMT) of each school and focus group discussions were held with available members of the School Governing Bodies

(SGBs) of the selected schools. These interviews were then transcribed and analysed.

Data was then captured in SPSS by trained data capturers and cleaned by one of the senior researchers and research assistant before data analysis commenced.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Repetition

It is not the argument of this paper to show grade failure as a desirable practice, but the re-

search does suggest that learners get promoted too easily with a detrimental impact on their later scholastic performance and ability to navigate the different grades.

On the issue of grade promotion, the paper argues that the high rates of grade repetition at secondary schools are directly related to the fact that learners get promoted too easily in primary schools. Given the context of current failure rates and repetition policy, as well as the bad performance of grade 12 learners at underperforming schools, the authors postulate that if students are held back according to their yearly performance failure rates would indeed be higher than is currently the case in primary schools, but this might produce better prepared learners in higher grades.

Although grade repetition per se is not seen as a negative practice it is still important to understand the context within which, especially high failure rates, occur given its impact on the learner, the educational system and ultimately the broader society. Our findings show that learners who fail are often ostracised and labeled by the school and their peers. They tend to experience problems with self-confidence and develop negative attitudes toward education and schools.

Other consequences of high failure and repetition rates as illuminated by this study are:

- I) Resources at schools are placed under pressure by high failure rates
- II) Classrooms become overcrowded and teachers overworked with an inevitable resultant decline in the overall quality of teaching and learning
- III) Catering for substantially higher pupil numbers also places huge additional pressure on the resources of the schools
- IV) A less tangible consequence for schools is the long-term damage high rates of repetition can cause to the well-being of staff and the reputation of the school as a centre of education.

The next section reviews those groups of students that are more at risk of repeating a grade. Understanding these might illuminate which groups are more vulnerable and the reasons for their poor performance.

### **Ethnicity and Performance**

The study found that most of learners at underperforming schools were African (66%) in a province where Colored's are in the majority

and Africans constitutes approximately 30% of the provincial population. In contrast, only 30% of learners in these schools were Coloured. When we compare the demographic profile of the province with the profile of learners at underperforming schools, it becomes evident that African learners are over-represented at underperforming schools.

As mentioned earlier, underperforming schools are characterized by high levels of grade repetition. Forty one percent of all learners in underperforming schools indicated that they had repeated one or more grades. On the face of it, our data for underperforming schools showed no significant difference in repetition rates between African and Coloured learners. However, further analysis revealed that Coloured learners at underperforming schools are more likely to show multiple repetition rates compared to African learners. For example 80% of Coloured learners repeated multiple grades compared to 35% of African learners. This is somewhat of an unexpected finding as the Coloured learners in the study show better socio-economic living environments than their African counterparts.

One of the possible reasons to explain this apparent anomaly is a seemingly difference between African and Coloured learners in their perception regarding the importance of education. This finding is supported by the findings of Salo (2005) who shows a 'poorer' culture of learning amongst Coloured learners which is imbedded in social perceptions of future reality and general teenage behaviour. Factors which suggest disengagement with education are the higher incidence of teenage pregnancy and gang-related activities amongst this group. This relationship between social perceptions, youth culture and educational attainment does, however, require more in-depth research.

### **Gender and Performance**

In comparing the failure rates of boy and girl learners the data show girls in general have greater success. Fifty percent of male compared to 35% of female learners indicated having repeated a grade. This finding is consistent with previous research done on repetition rates of male and female learners in South Africa (Gustafsson 2011: 8).

In addition the researchers established the difference between female and male repetition

rates to be substantial at underperforming schools. One tentative explanation for this phenomenon offered by experienced teachers in interviews is that girls growing up in poor socio-economic conditions and working class communities are often burdened with domestic responsibilities from a young age. As a result they mature earlier than their male counterparts bringing with it a greater sense of goal directedness and resilience - qualities that might influence their relationship with the school and their studies.

Another possible explanation for the differential performance between the genders concerns the dynamics operating in impoverished areas, where a strong *macho* culture often dominates teenage peer groups. This finds expression in deviant and aggressive behaviour in the context of anti-social gang formation. The underlying ethos of many of these gangs is anti-intellectual, which encourages and celebrates values, norms and behaviour focused on immediate gratification (Salo 2005). It was pointed out by teachers that teenage boys, in particular, find it difficult to resist this potent counter culture, even while attending school. This is often exacerbated by the absence of positive male role-models.

### Rural versus Urban Performance

Repetition rates were higher in rural underperforming schools (51%) compared to urban schools (40%). Historically Black rural schools in South Africa, including farm schools, struggle to shed the legacy of urban bias in socio-

economic development. Rural schools are typically more under-resourced than their urban counterparts and face deeper levels of poverty than urban areas (Bloch 2009).

Table 3, illustrates, the impact of (multiple) grade repetition on the age composition of classes and the extent to which learners drop behind the normative age for a specific grade, by showing the age of learners as per grade at the time of the study, compared to the normative age generally expected.

### Factors that Impact Underperforming Secondary Schools

Our research results reveal that the root causes for the high levels of repetition at underperforming schools can primarily be related to three factors: (i) Inappropriate policy, (ii) School related factors and (iii) Socio-economic factors.

#### *Inappropriate Policy*

Principals, SMTs and teachers agree that the most important factor that impacts on grade repetition is of a systemic and policy nature. Current policy states that a learner may only be "held back" once per educational phase. This imperative forces and causes schools to promote learners to the next grade without them having mastered the necessary subject knowledge and educational competencies as demanded by the curriculum. This was found to be fundamental to the under-performance of learners (and for that matter schools) because, as one teacher at a rural school said

**Table 3: Grade and corresponding normative age of learner (2011)**

| Current age<br>of learner | Grade and corresponding normative age |                       |                        |                        |                        | Total |
|---------------------------|---------------------------------------|-----------------------|------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|-------|
|                           | Gr. 8<br>(13-14years)                 | Gr. 9<br>(14-15years) | Gr. 10<br>(15-16years) | Gr. 11<br>(16-17years) | Gr. 12<br>(17-18years) |       |
| 12                        | 3.8%                                  |                       |                        |                        |                        | 0.7%  |
| 13                        | 38.0%                                 | 2.8%                  | 1.0%                   |                        |                        | 7.6%  |
| 14                        | 36.7%                                 | 38.0%                 | 4.0%                   |                        | 1.1%                   | 14.1% |
| 15                        | 16.5%                                 | 31.0%                 | 33.0%                  | 1.1%                   | 1.1%                   | 16.2% |
| 16                        | 2.5%                                  | 16.9%                 | 31.0%                  | 19.1%                  | 4.5%                   | 15.5% |
| 17                        | 2.5%                                  | 5.6%                  | 21.0%                  | 34.0%                  | 37.5%                  | 21.3% |
| 18                        |                                       | 5.6%                  | 6.0%                   | 20.2%                  | 22.7%                  | 11.3% |
| 19                        |                                       |                       | 2.0%                   | 16.0%                  | 19.3%                  | 7.9%  |
| 20                        |                                       |                       | 1.0%                   | 5.3%                   | 10.2%                  | 3.5%  |
| 21                        |                                       |                       |                        | 3.2%                   | 2.3%                   | 1.2%  |
| 22                        |                                       |                       |                        | 1.1%                   | 1.1%                   | 0.5%  |
| 26                        |                                       |                       | 1.0%                   |                        |                        | 0.2%  |
| Total number per grade    | 22                                    | 28                    | 31                     | 46                     | 33                     | 160   |
| Total %                   | 100.0                                 | 100.0                 | 100.0                  | 100.0                  | 100.0                  | 100   |

*“...the school system is saturated with this problem, we are forced to promote mediocrity by the system... we pass the ball on to the next teacher... as the child grows older the problem grows bigger... when only 28% of the matriculants passes, we get the blame, then we are told to pull up our socks, to get more involved... I have told the District office the problem started 10 years ago, they say they know, but that we must ‘maak ‘n plan’...”*

A SMT member responsible for the Grade 8 learners at another rural school related her experience:

*“...last year we had 159 Grade 8s... I saw right at the beginning of the year we going to struggle with these children... they come from a variety of rural farm schools that are very weak... some could not read or write a sentence... I begged the District office to keep 79 learners back; they would never make it in Grade 9... I was not allowed to do so; it seems they are too afraid of the Head Office in Cape Town...”*

Teachers and SMT members interviewed felt strongly that District Offices were not helpful in dealing with the contradictions and anomalies created by the application of this current policy. They were of the opinion that the District Offices were often caught between the realities of what was happening at schools and strict adherence to a set of tight target and policy prescriptions.

The high prevalence of learners leaving the formal school system in Grades 10 and 11 should be seen as a direct consequence of the enforced promotion of educationally unfit learners caused by, as one SMT member described it, *“the indiscriminate and reckless application of a mindless policy”*. Another respondent described the present promotion policy as *“perverse, a cynical chase after numbers”*. It was stressed that it was *“a selfish policy, designed to protect the education authorities and the school system whilst doing an enormous disservice to the children and their parents”*.

### **School Related Factors**

Researchers like Christie (2001), Taylor (2007a), and Taylor (2007b) have extensively discussed School related factors in literature and highlight operational areas within the schooling environment spanning teaching and learning,

leadership and management, safety and security, school culture, governance and stakeholder participation.

### **The Poor Quality of Education at Primary School**

The poor quality of education at primary school level is perceived as one of the main causes of grade repetition in secondary school by educators, principals, SMT and SGB members. During interviews it was repeatedly stressed by the respondents that primary schools are failing in their duty to lay a solid educational foundation, especially in the critical areas of numeracy and literacy. This results in a shaky platform from which Grade 8 learners launch into the much more varied and demanding curriculum of secondary school (Bayat et al. 2014: 183). It would thus appear that an investigation into the performance of primary schools in township and rural areas, primarily feeding underperforming secondary schools, should first and foremost be conducted in the search for an explanation for their persistent under-performance.

### **Leadership and Organisational Systems**

Leadership and organisational systems was shown as having a profound impact on the quality of teaching and learning at a underperforming schools. In approximately 60% of underperforming schools surveyed, the relationship between the SMT and principal could be described as tense, at best, and dysfunctional, at worst. SMTs criticised the quality of leadership and the dedication of some principals. Allegations were made by SMTs about principals' not taking action against teachers whose behaviour was undisciplined and unprofessional, and about principals who were too afraid to discipline learners and who did not protect teachers against abusive parents. SMT members were also dissatisfied with the quality of communication within schools, alleging that principals withheld information as they chose.

It was pointed out by SMT members that weak and ineffective leadership impacts directly on the quality of teaching and learning as teachers struggle to manage classes due to a pervasive lack of discipline; feel insecure because of the absence of clear procedures and directives; and in some cases, feel unappreciated. From the protracted interactions with SMT members, it

became apparent that they were also disillusioned and lacking in enthusiasm.

### ***School Management Teams (SMT)***

Teachers were divided on the perceived contribution made by SMTs towards improving their teaching. It was disconcerting that a significant percentage indicated that SMTs never call meetings with teachers. Although there was broad agreement that meetings with SMTs facilitate communication and the flow of important information that help them deal with, what one teacher referred to as the “*ever growing stack of paper work and deadlines*”, nearly 40% felt these meetings were mere talk shops with few decisions being acted upon and implemented.

Very few teachers thought regular meetings with SMTs assisted them with curriculum issues, specific questions around subject content, improvement of their style of teaching or the effective management of classes. According to teachers, SMTs lack adequate critical knowledge, technical capacity and are weak leaders and managers. Teachers articulated a need for effective assistance, guidance and mentoring in most aspects of teaching, but specifically around issues of effective delivery of curricula and class management.

### ***School Governing Bodies (SGB)***

School governing bodies have the potential to make important contributions to quality teaching and learning and to the effective functioning of schools. Whereas SGB members mostly held positive views about their role in improving educational outcomes, principals and teachers were less enthusiastic about their role. Virtually all principals confirmed that SGB members were equipped in performing a number of mandatory functions, but did not add much value in empowering the school to any significant extent, lamenting a general lack of financial acumen or fundraising abilities with all principals lamenting the resultant “*poor man’s educational diet*” their schools have to function with.

Teachers were even more critical when evaluating the role of SGBs. Thirty eight percent thought they made no real tangible contribution to the school, in general, and the education of children, in particular. They felt SGBs played a strong part in the low morale amongst both teach-

ers and learners by criticising rather than building competencies and self-esteem. The view, repeatedly expressed, is that members of the SGBs are mostly from working class backgrounds and they did not fully grasp the challenges that teachers and schools faced on a daily basis, nor are they able to help address the problems teachers encounter on a regular basis.

Teachers also felt that SGBs were often incapable to help apply effective disciplinary measures, like recommending expulsion. This had a destructive impact on the overall dynamic of a school. They were also of the opinion that SGBs did not have the necessary knowledge to make informed decisions regarding teacher appointments.

According to teachers the lack of capacity amongst SGB members to effectively raise funds for their schools, as one of the most important strategic functions of governing bodies, forces teachers to divert their attention from teaching related activities to fundraising with obvious negative consequences for the teaching and learning programme at school.

Collectively these factors served to impact negatively on quality tuition and instruction, partially explaining under-performance at these schools.

### ***Absenteeism, Class Skipping and Late Coming by Teachers and Learners***

Principals and SMTs in turn were frustrated with the high levels of absenteeism of teachers at underperforming schools and claimed it played a significant role in failure and repetition rates at their schools. They felt that this has a profound impact on the lack of teaching and learning in classrooms and “*time on task spent*” at these schools.

Principals of schools catering for Xhosa-speaking learners singled out the serious disruptive impact that the phenomenon of teachers attending funerals in the Eastern Cape has on a sustainable educational programme. Present departmental policy requires a minimum number of days of absence before a temporary replacement can be employed. Often teachers return before replacements can be requested, leaving learners without tuition for consecutive days. One principal referred to “*the white school with lots of money in the town*” having a reservoir of highly qualified stand-by teachers that get paid to stand in for absent teachers. Some SMT mem-



bers thought that endemic absenteeism of both teachers and learners was a result of the lack of discipline and non-implementation of existing policies due to absent or weak leadership demonstrated by principals.

Contact time between educators and learners is also severely compromised by the skipping of class hours by learners and educators alike. Eighty two percent of principals indicated that learners at underperforming schools were “*always late*” whilst 36% indicated that staff members were “*always late*”. Forty five percent of principals indicated that skipping class hours by learners “*always*” happened, whilst 55% stated that staff members “*sometimes*” did. In the case of staff members these problems are often exacerbated by the absence of an effective policy governing such behaviour in underperforming schools. In slightly more than 50% of the sample schools, principals indicated that there was no staff policy governing absenteeism, late coming or the skipping of class hours. In the few schools where such a policy was in place, it was often not effectively enforced.

**Language of Learning and Teaching**

The medium of instruction in schools, referred to as the language of learning and teaching (LOLT), at the black underperforming schools was singled out as a serious constraint on effective instruction and learning. Besides, responses related to the language used when teaching showed that different practices are followed, specifically amongst teachers whose mother tongue was not English or Afrikaans. In spite of formal policy regulations stating the language of teaching and learning as English and Afrikaans, a great number of teachers at underperforming schools indicated that they made use of mother tongue instruction. In all these cases the mother tongue referred to isiXhosa. This seemed to be mainly due to teachers as well as learners limited proficiency in English. This was illustrated by reports by teachers from a specific school mentioning cases of Grade 9 learners not able to answer a class test and merely submitting the questions back as answers, effectively exhibiting zero competence in comprehending any English.

Less than 20% of learners who repeated a grade received schooling in their mother tongue compared to 33% who were partially schooled

in their home language, and nearly 50% who were taught in a first or second additional language. In many classes the researchers observed how teachers switched between languages, often to explain subject content. If strictly applied this practice is against official policy. A unique challenge is presented by learners migrating from the Eastern Cape, who in many instances, do not even have a rudimentary proficiency in English. All stakeholders at black schools were unanimous that the present LOLT policy was not working and was significantly contributing to high repetition rates.

**Overcrowding of Classrooms and Teacher to Learner Ratio’s**

The research findings, as illustrated in Table 4, established that overcrowding, especially in the lower grades of secondary schools, has a negative impact on teaching and learning. Learners, who were already educationally compromised at primary school level, are thrust into overcrowded classrooms. The research also found that for most underperforming schools the teacher to learner ratio is 40 learners per teacher. This is higher than the provincial average of 29 learners per teacher.

**Table 4: Average learner to teacher ratio for the period 2008-2010**

| Learner grade group | Learner to teacher ratio as reported for the period 2008-2010 |       |       |
|---------------------|---|-------|-------|
|                     | 2008  | 2009  | 2010  |
| Grade 8             | 46: 1   | 42: 1 | 44: 1 |
| Grade 9             | 41: 1   | 38: 1 | 44: 1 |
| Grade 10            | 46: 1   | 43: 1 | 42: 1 |
| Grade 11            | 42: 1   | 45: 1 | 40: 1 |
| Grade 12            | 41: 1   | 43: 1 | 40: 1 |

Clearly this type of environment is conducive to neither teaching nor learning. Teachers complained that these conditions greatly impacts learner concentration. Overcrowded class rooms make it impossible for teachers to move between desks and even between the front row and the chalkboard. This, together with high learner to teacher ratios, makes any personal assistance during classes practically impossible. In addition, large class sizes make it extremely difficult for teachers to enforce discipline.

### *Safety and Security of the School Ecology*

A stable, peaceful and safe school environment is conducive to successful learning. Our findings suggest that issues around safety and security, both on the school grounds and in the classroom have an impact on repetition rates. The data in Table 5 show that incidences of violence, intimidation, illegal possession of drugs, inappropriate sexual behaviour, alcohol abuse and bodily injury to learners, verbal abuse and weapon possession are high in the schools sampled. Many teachers and learners also have to deal with intimidation, aggressive and violent behaviour in classrooms, which makes teaching and learning difficult. Eighty seven percent of teachers indicated that disruptive learners significantly limit teaching and learning.

The Western Cape Education Department (WCED) has responded to the lack of safety and security at schools by launching the *Safe Schools Project*. Schools are given inter alia access to security cameras, gates, and fencing with razor wire. Critics have indicated that the project does not assure the security of individuals but mainly that of the buildings and equipment. A lack of funding is a serious constraint of this initiative, preventing the project of immediately attending to urgent needs of schools.

### *Teacher Experience as an Indicator of Teaching Quality*

The study established that lower repetition rates were associated with longer teaching ex-

perience (measured in terms of number of years teaching) and higher qualifications. In addition to the above, the research finding suggests the alignment between subject training and actual subject taught to have an impact on repetition rates. The data in Table 6 show that a large proportion of teachers included in the study did not teach subjects in which they were trained. For example, only 33% of teachers who specialised in Afrikaans taught Afrikaans. The absence of adequate numbers of educators trained in specialist subjects like Mathematics and Physical Science means that “non-subject specialists” often have to stand in to teach these critical subjects.

**Table 6: Training received in the subject taught**

| <i>Subject currently teaching</i>     | <i>Percentage of teachers who received training in the subject currently taught</i> |           |
|---------------------------------------|---|-----------|
|                                       | <i>Yes</i>  | <i>No</i> |
| Afrikaans home language               | 80  | 20        |
| Afrikaans (First additional language) | 33  | 67        |
| English home language                 | 100   | 0         |
| English (First additional language)   | 91  | 9         |
| Physical Science                      | 67  | 33        |
| Mathematics                           | 73  | 27        |
| Mathematics literacy                  | 82  | 18        |
| Accounting                            | 100   | 0         |

A seemingly common tendency amongst teachers identified by principals is coming to

**Table 5: Key issues and problems that impact safety and security at underperforming schools (learner responses)**

| <i>How often does the following happen at your school?</i> |                   |                      |                  |
|--|-------------------|----------------------|------------------|
| <i>Aspects related to safety and security at school</i>    | <i>Always (%)</i> | <i>Sometimes (%)</i> | <i>Never (%)</i> |
| Swearing   | 39.2              | 48.6                 | 12.2             |
| Vandalism  | 23.7              | 58.5                 | 17.8             |
| Theft  | 28                | 56.9                 | 15.2             |
| Intimidation or verbal abuse among learners                | 23.1              | 57                   | 19.9             |
| Physical or bodily injury among learners                   | 13.9              | 62.2                 | 23.9             |
| Intimidation of verbal abuse among educators: staff        | 7.1               | 30.4                 | 62.5             |
| Physical or bodily injury to teaching staff                | 9.9               | 27.4                 | 62.6             |
| Tobacco use or possession                                  | 50.7              | 31.1                 | 18.2             |
| Alcohol abuse or possession                                | 9.8               | 38.6                 | 51.6             |
| Illegal drug abuse or possession                           | 19.1              | 41.6                 | 39.3             |
| Weapon use or possession                                   | 18.3              | 46.8                 | 34.9             |
| Inappropriate sexual behaviour among learners              | 10.5              | 42.4                 | 47.1             |
| Verbal abuse of learners by educators                      | 10.3              | 43.8                 | 45.9             |
| Verbal abuse of educators by learners                      | 10.5              | 49.2                 | 40.3             |
| Inappropriate relationships between learners and teachers  | 19.4              | 24.9                 | 55.7             |

class unprepared for teaching and then using tuition time for class preparation instead of instruction, thus wasting valuable teaching time.

### ***Socio-economic Factors***

The publication of the Coleman Report in the USA (1966) firmly puts the spotlight on the effects of the physical and social environments on educational performance. The study confirmed that high repetition rates at schools were directly related to the adverse social and economic conditions faced by learners, but that poverty on its own was not responsible for poor educational outcomes in all cases. This is evident in the examples of some poorer countries in Sub-Saharan Africa that continue to outperform South African pupils in international literacy and numeracy tests. Today, research continues to show that school performance is directly and fundamentally impacted by socio-economic factors such as race, gender, poverty; and neighbourhood conditions (Van der Berg 2008; Thrupp 2006; Lee and Madyun 2009).

The researchers found that *most* underperforming schools are located in poor communities that also exhibited dysfunctional behaviour. According to O'Connor (2004: 58), a dysfunctional community can be characterized by a, "*number of social conditions: symptoms (including a state of mind in a community) such as crime, gang activities, violence and trauma, tuberculosis, alcoholism, substance abuse, teenage pregnancies..*"

According to this author a community that is dysfunctional, as defined above, has already internalised a dysfunctional system of beliefs, norms, values and knowledge. It is very difficult for schools located in dysfunctional communities to counter the culture and values of the surrounding community. Berliner (2009: 29) also found,

*"Schools whose attendance boundaries include dysfunctional neighborhoods, face ... greater challenges in nurturing student achievement than do those that draw students from healthier neighborhoods."*

The research findings also reveal, learners at underperforming schools very often come from families where both the nuclear and extended family units have disintegrated. An analysis of the primary caregivers of the learners interviewed reveals significant differences between

the caregivers of learners on the basis of race. On average local African learners are least likely to live with both their biological parents (27%) compared to 71% of foreign African learners and 45% of Coloured learners. The vast majority of local Africans live with only their mother (36%) compared to 26% of Colored's and 7% of foreign Africans. Migrant learners were particularly vulnerable as only 26% of them live with both their biological parents, 29% live with their mothers only and a staggering 14% live without any adults in the household (compared to 3% of non-migrant learners).

In addition to the above, the low level of educational attainment among caregivers, even in households where both biological parents are present, suggests that parents may not be able to meaningfully assist learners with homework. For example, 48% of primary breadwinners had completed some secondary schooling whilst only 28% had completed secondary school. This lack of educational attainment of caregivers is of particular relevance for Grade 11 and 12 learners as it implies that these learners are often left with little or no educational support apart from the school system.

The causes of high rates of grade failure and repetition are multiple and multi-layered. This implies that a comprehensive attack on causes is required to address performance at underperforming schools. Any solution to underperforming schools would necessarily require interventions at both school level and domains that are external to schools.

Taylor (2003) states those strategies for change require focusing on both the school and the Department of Education. Reeves, Forde, O'Brien, Smith and Tomlinson (2002) also confirm this by indicating that the need to engage with teachers in bringing about reform will be unavoidable in the end. Schools need to establish for themselves exactly what they wish to achieve and they need to select and modify procedures and structures accordingly. They further state that it is the learning of teachers in action that makes a difference to their behaviour and therefore the task of performance management is to explore the ways in which such learning can be supported in school and how external provision and networking with other institutions can best enhance that support.

Strong evidence exists showing that adherence to basic educational systems and process-

es can have an impact on good teaching and learning. This is well-documented by Taylor (2006, 2007a). His research shows that issues around the maximisation of contact time with learners in class, the presence of both learners and teachers at school and in class, makes a positive impact on educational performance and on the reduction of grade failure. Much of this is achieved by good systems and discipline. Our research has confirmed this, but also revealed that the lack of expertise at underperforming schools meant that teachers were often required to teach subjects in which they had no formal specialisation.

The researchers also found that governance, management and leadership at underperforming schools, all aspects that play a critical role at well-functioning schools, to be weak. A lack of implementation of departmental systems is evident. One example of this is the high percentage of principals not adhering to the policy guidelines governing absenteeism, skipping of classes by teachers and learners and late-coming by learners in particular. This results in a chronic and systemic reduction of teaching and learning in class that is “*time on task*”, and subsequently contributes to high failure and repetition rates amongst learners.

The critical role that a good foundation phase plays in the successful participation and eventual completion of the educational career of learners is well-established. Research has found a relatively high percentage of learners had to repeat Grades 1 and 2, suggesting a low level of school readiness amongst six and seven year-olds in the townships and rural areas of the Western Cape.

A policy issue interrogated by the researchers was the role of official language (policy) in successful teaching and learning. Research evidence clearly points to the didactic advantages of an appropriate LOLT (Bloch 2002). Our findings have confirmed this. Principals, SMT members and teachers have stressed the difficulties that already disadvantaged learners experience with a language medium that is not their first and in many cases not their second language of preference.

Although there is no consensus in the literature as to the impact of class size on teaching and learning, our research suggests that teachers have difficulty managing overcrowded classes. This is exacerbated by badly disciplined chil-

dren and learners struggling with concentration and the memorizing of work due to the regular exposure to trauma associated with domestic violence and environments saturated with social problems. Under more ideal circumstances, that would imply a relatively safe and stable home and community environment, as well as a functional school, class size might not be a critical variable; however under circumstances and conditions as described above, it does become an additional constraining and disabling variable.

## CONCLUSION

The aim of the study was to determine the reasons for the underperformance of the learners and its impact on the education system of the country. The overarching reasons for the lack of sustainable performance of these schools point to the entire education system rather than to these schools per se.

The results of this research clearly indicate how complex education problems are in South Africa and perhaps in the entire world. It also reflects the importance of qualitative research in the education sector, in that it reveals realities of the social phenomenon as witnessed by those involved in it on a daily basis, as opposed to external people who do not have a deeper understanding of the education system.

The study concluded that lower repetition rates were associated with longer teaching experience (measured in terms of number of years teaching) and higher qualifications. The study also confirmed that high repetition rates at schools were directly related to the adverse social and economic conditions faced by learners. It found most underperforming schools were located in poor, dysfunctional communities and that it was difficult for them to counter the culture and values of the surrounding community without the support of the NGO and private sectors.

Furthermore, the repetition rates were higher in rural underperforming schools (51%) compared to urban schools (40%). In comparing the failure rates of boy and girl learners the data show girls in general have greater success. Fifty percent of male compared to 35% of female learners indicated having repeated a grade. Education development in South Africa is a tall task, which will not be achieved in a short time, requiring substantial intervention at both the school level and broader societal level before

positive changes are reflected in the country's schools.

### **POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

These recommendations are based on research carried out in underperforming secondary schools in the Western Cape, and are of a systemic and general nature. It should be considered for implementation at all (underperforming) schools in South Africa.

#### **Recommendation 1: Cast a Solid Foundation**

*High quality educate programmes should be introduced to reach the 2-4 year olds living in vulnerable and marginalised areas before they reach their reception year.*

The findings point to substantial failure rates in the first two years of schooling. This proves that a high percentage of children in townships and rural areas are not ready to participate in formal schooling at the beginning of their school careers. A broad consensus exists amongst educationalists that to successfully participate and complete formal schooling, learners must be able to comfortably deal with the first two or three years of schooling that is, the foundation phase.

#### **Recommendation 2: Take a New Look at Primary Schools**

*The quality of teaching within the primary school sector should be improved, specifically those feeding underperforming secondary schools.*

It is recommended that the National Department of Basic Education institute a compulsory national Grade 7 assessment or examination in an effort to ensure a basic competency for learners entering secondary schooling. This will ensure that learners are assessed in a standardised fashion and that only those learners with the requisite skills are allowed to advance. It is acknowledged that this gate-keeping will inevitably increase learner numbers at primary level and measures to assist schools in managing this development should be instituted simultaneously so as not to disrupt the educational programme.

#### **Recommendation 3: Rethink Grade Promotion Policy**

*Existing policies governing the promotion of learners per learning phase should be re-considered.*

The research found that the current policy whereby learners are allowed to fail only a set number of grades during a 12 year cycle is fundamentally flawed and has implications for both the learner and school. To address this, schools must be allowed to fail learners that do not achieve the required standard in examinations. No learner should be promoted without meeting the requisite standard.

#### **Recommendation 4: Reduce Teacher to Learner Ratio**

*The Department of Basic Education should increase the number of classrooms and teachers in the lower grades of secondary school significantly.*

The research established that learner to teacher ratios at underperforming secondary schools, specifically Grades 8 to 10, were bigger than the prescribed norm. We therefore recommend that the Department of Basic Education significantly increase the human resource capacity of secondary schools in order to bring down the teacher to pupil ratio (ideally 1 to 25) to enable teachers to identify learning deficiencies and afford remedial intervention and/or individual assistance to learners.

#### **Recommendation 5: Make the Language Policy Work for Learners**

*The Department of Education should address the present LOLT policy with a stronger focus on home language instruction.*

The present official language policy prescribing teaching and learning to be in either English and/or Afrikaans in South African secondary schools was found to profoundly debilitate or constrain both the learning and teaching process at underperforming secondary schools, which in the case of Western Cape primarily caters for Xhosa-speaking learners.

#### **Recommendation 6: Strengthen Leadership and Management**

*Principals should sign performance contracts, SMTs should be up-skilled and SGB's should be differently constituted.*

Shortcomings with the management and governance of underperforming schools were found. This is due to the poor quality of principal leader-

ship generally found at underperforming secondary schools evidenced in poor principal accountability. It is recommended that, in conjunction with a performance contract, a mentoring system be instituted to develop leadership skills.

SMTs are perceived by teachers not to assist educators to become better teachers. Their contribution could be enhanced if they were upskilled in their respective subjects and freed up more by the appointment of additional teachers.

Although SGBs potentially can make meaningful contributions, their impact is seen as limited. A possible route to strengthen the capacity of SGBs is through the targeted nominations of highly skilled individuals from civil society, private sector companies and academia.

#### **Recommendation 7: Revisit Existing Official Policy Regulating Teacher Absenteeism**

*The current official policy that regulates absenteeism amongst teachers needs to be critically reassessed by the relevant authorities*

Principals at underperforming schools stressed the negative impact on teaching and learning of the high prevalence of absenteeism amongst teachers. They alleged that many teachers exploit the current policy that regulates absenteeism.

#### **Recommendation 8: Building a Bridge - Acting On Environmental Challenges**

*A bridging mechanism should be developed to address both school and non-school issues.*

Our findings have established a raft of essentially non-educational variables that influence the ability and attitude of learners to productively and optimally engage in educational programs.

Educational authorities have limited capacity and influence and are not able to act back at broad societal realities and challenges impacting on learners. It is important that society recognises and acts on this.

The researchers recommend a bridging mechanism that brings together programmes and interventions by all stakeholders in society. Given the multi-faceted nature of variables associated with underperformance at township and rural schools, a broad-based and integrated response is sought that involves government, civil society, business and the community. This is in line

with a recent statement made by the Deputy Minister of Basic Education provided below:

*“The starting point for change in the education sector is with the poorest of the poor, and the key question is how do we get the public and our partners in the private sector to respond to this?”* (Deputy Minister of Basic Education, Mr. E Surty, 2011.)

An example of such a bridging system can be found in the Madrasati “My School” Initiative, developed and implemented in schools in Jordan. It is proposed that more such models are reviewed as positive examples of building bridges between teachers, learners and ultimately the community.

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#### **NOTES**

1. Power point presentation of Department of Education, Ministry of Education, South Africa Pretoria, 2007.
2. Refer <http://www.polity.org.za/paper/sa-statement-by-equal-education-asserts-that-the-western-cape-education-department-assist-underperforming-schools-not-close-them>-(Retrieved on 21 September 2012).

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