

## Re-writing Grade 12 Examinations in South Africa: Students' Dreams to Improve or a Sense of Neglect and Despair? (Re-writing Grade 12)

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**ABSTRACT** Passing Grade 12 examination is an ultimate aim of any student, while for those who fail, re-writing is an opportunity to attain the much needed matric certificate. The aim of this paper was to investigate challenges faced by students re-writing Grade 12 examinations. Focus group interviews were conducted to collect data from ten (10) students who were purposively sampled. The results show that students who were re-writing matric examinations were faced with a dilemma of writing Curriculum and Assessments Policy Statements (CAPS) examinations with topics that were relatively new to them, with no support provided to them from the Department of Basic Education (DBE). The study recommends that students who are re-writing matric examinations should be provided with adequate resources and also be allowed to attend classes in any public schools of their choice in preparation for their exams.

### INTRODUCTION

The Department of Basic Education (DBE) (2015) articulates clearly that the attainment of a Bachelor-level pass in Grade 12, previously known as matric exemption, is an important goal for many students. The DBE (2010) also acknowledges that one in every eight youths in South Africa receives a Grade 12 pass good enough to allow such a student to do a Bachelors' degree at the university. This would indicate that the remaining seven out of eight students are those who might only manage to get a Diploma, Higher certificate-level pass or even fail their Grade 12 examination. Some of those students who aspire to attain a Bachelor-level pass that will enable them to do a Bachelor's degree are left to re-write supplementary examinations or re-write as private candidates.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) (2015) articulates equity in education which is rooted in achieving equality. Equity in education is further equated to the provision of best opportunities for all students in order to help them achieve their full potential, and is also about actions aimed at addressing instances of disadvantage which

restrict educational achievement (UNESCO 2015). The full potential of students is partially achieved when and after passing matric or Grade 12 examinations. This would explain why Matric or Grade 12 in South Africa is often mistakenly seen as a do-or-die situation, with some passing with flying colours while others are left feeling frustrated with their grades (Kasi Times 2012). Dagada (2012) notes that it is a painful experience and sight that 20 years after the democratic dispensation, there is little improvement in schools and education system, generally. The vast majority of rural and township schools still lack the basic infrastructure and facilities that should be pre-requisites for a conducive educational environment for all learners who wish to learn (Dagada 2012). Most worrying is that such learners are faced with even tougher prospects of finding work when one in two young South Africans are already jobless (Kasi Times 2012). Another worrying factor is that the majority of educators in rural and township schools are not conversant with the curriculum. This has been exacerbated by the fact that the South African education system is yet to find a curriculum set to redress and address the so-called injustices that have been brought about by the Bantu education system during the apartheid era. In the past twenty years since the attainment of democracy, the education system in South Africa has been piloting and doing trial and error experiments on the majority of learners with different curriculum dispensations.

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## THE CONSTITUTION OF THE REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA NO. 108 OF 1996

### Section 29: The Right to a Basic Education for Everyone

Rieser (2008) notes that education is a human right and that the expectation is that all children, regardless of their social status, gender and physical or any other disability, should have access to quality education. South Africa boasts of a world-revered Constitution which specifically champions the rights of individuals to improve the quality of life of all citizens and to free the potential of each person (Payi 2013). Payi (2013) quipped that in light of the Constitution that propagates that every citizen has the right to choose their trade, occupation or profession freely, one would wonder if every South African child has that right.

De Vos (2013) notes that one of the utmost imperative duties of any modern democratic state is to provide all its inhabitants with access to a minimum standard of basic education and to allow everyone in society to flourish and reach full potential. Twenty years after the advent of democracy, the South African government is still not fulfilling this essential responsibility as the education system continues to be catastrophic, failing to respect the human dignity of all children (De Vos 2013). De Vos (2013) lambasted the Minister of Basic Education for just assuming that black African children know nothing about the shockingly unequal and inferior schooling that limits the ability of many children to obtain even a half decent education to prepare them for adult life. Many such black African children continue to experience lack of basic infrastructure at their schools every day and suffer the consequences thereof (De Vos 2013).

In terms of Section 29 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, everyone has the right to a basic education. Thus, in terms of section 7(2), the state has a duty to respect, protect, promote and fulfil the right to basic education. De Vos (2013) adds that unlike other social and economic rights, this right is not qualified, and the state has an obligation to provide everyone with basic education, regardless of any resource constraints.

UNICEF (2007) outlines clearly that once states endorse international human rights instruments, they commit themselves, through which

ever government is in power, to compliance with the rights embodied in those instruments. To ensure the realisation of the right to education for all children, states have three levels of obligations, namely:

- ♦ To fulfil the right to education by ensuring that education is available for all children and that positive measures are taken to enable children to benefit from it. Examples of these measures are: tackling poverty; adapting the curricula to the needs of all children and engaging parents to enable them to provide effective support to their children's education;
- ♦ To respect the right to education by avoiding any action that would serve to prevent children from accessing education, for example, legislation that categorizes certain groups of children with disabilities as uneducable;
- ♦ To protect the right to education by taking the necessary measures to remove the barriers to education posed by individuals or communities, for example, cultural barriers to education or violence and abuse in the school environment.

### The Importance of Grade 12 National Senior Certificate

Dagada (2012) states that the Grade 12 National Senior Certificate (NSC) examination is the most used yardstick in South Africa to determine the improvement of education in schools. How learners perform in the NSC (Grade 12) examination is a critical matter for the whole nation, and the Grade 12 results attract lots of attention (Dagada 2012). So far, the results have not been very good and have shown that the crisis in South African education is deepening. It is highly unacceptable that two out of every three Grade 10 learners in South African schools do not pass the Grade 12 examination. Of those who scrape through and pass, only a quarter achieve a university entrance certificate (Dagada 2012).

The DBE (2011) announced that learners should consider the opportunity to improve on their performance in particular subjects or to have a chance to rewrite subjects that they failed in the NSC examinations of 2010. DBE (2011) further states that learners who have not succeeded in their examinations and who do not qualify for supplementary examinations must re-enrol at school without delay as long as they meet the age requirement, which is being under 21 years

of age. This will give them a second chance at writing their Grade 12 NSC exams. With additional effort, it is assumed that they will succeed. Grade 12 learners who failed and are over 21 years of age should register as private candidates or enrol at Adult Education Centres. Participation in programmes at these centres is free and available for young people and adults who have not completed their schooling (DBE 2011). Not much is said about how these learners who are to re-write their examinations will be assisted or supported in order for them to do better. It is shocking that without any kind of support, these learners are expected to do better, notwithstanding the fact that they failed their exams while being taught in their classes. What chances do they have of succeeding or doing better when they are on their own? This might be seen as contrary to the Bill of Rights of the country's Constitution which states that the state has an obligation, through reasonable measures, to progressively make this education available and accessible (SA info Reporter 2013).

From 2008 to 2010, the DBE only admitted learners who had either passed Grade 11 or written at least one Senior Certificate examination before 2008. As of June 2011, anyone who is 21 years or older, and can motivate to the DBE why he/she should be allowed to complete their Senior Certificate may be eligible (One Stop Matric Solution Centre 2014).

The South Africa Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) (2014) reported that learners who failed matric between 2011 and 2013 will be given a second chance to rewrite their National Senior Certificate exams. The SABC went on to report that the National Youth Development Agency (NYDA) and Sector Education and Training Authority (SETA) for Education Training Development Practice are working on a programme aimed at offering the learners a chance to rewrite their examinations. It was also reported that ten (R10) million rand has been set aside for the programme.

The expectations are that in Limpopo Province only, at least 668 learners who failed their matric are to sit for such examinations (SABC 2014). When the 2010 results were announced, the African National Congress Youth League (ANCYL) stated that they are expressing their heartfelt sympathy to those learners who did not make it. The statement by ANCYL went on to say that they are encouraging learners who failed their matric to take advantage of the opportunity to rewrite their exams.

"It's not all doom and gloom. The future remains bright for them as well", the statement continued. Even though education is to be taken very seriously to an extent that every South African needs to embrace President Jacob Zuma's call to make education a societal issue, such a call can be viewed with several question marks. This is mainly because all South Africans have the right to a basic education, including adult basic education and further education (SA info Reporter 2013).

In announcing the 2012 matric results Motshemga (2013) stated the following:

*We're encouraged by notable improvements in the education of children and society. Sustained improvements on matric results are a consequence of systemic interventions for strengthening and raising performance in all levels of the system.*

Legotlo et al. (2002) state that lack of resources is one of the major causes of poor performance in Grade 12. The problem is worsened by the shortage of relevant textbooks as the majority of learners do not have all the required books. It is no secret that current experiences by students rewriting their matric have been prevalent even in the past years; this is something that leaves such students with a zero chance of enhancing their results. It must be noted that these students failed to pass or attain their pass while exposed to full time contact classes on daily basis, having textbooks and study guides, attending enrichment classes such as the Saturday classes, school holiday classes and winter classes. What chances do they have of passing and improving on their results without those resources? The chances of passing or improving their results are very slim.

## Objective

This paper was aimed at understanding the challenges of learners who have failed Grade 12, and how those who did not meet tertiary education entry requirements feel and perceive their future in their everyday lives when preparing to write final year examinations for the second or the third time.

## METHODOLOGY

This research adopted qualitative phenomenological approach as it was aimed at understanding and interpreting the meaning of learners who have failed Grade 12, and how those

who did not meet tertiary education entry requirements perceive their future in their everyday lives when preparing to write final year examinations (De Vos et al. 2005). The population for this study consisted of students who were re-writing Grade 12 in the November 2014 examinations in one of the Adult Education centres in the Dzindi Circuit, Vhembe District in the Limpopo Province of South Africa. A purposive sampling procedure was used to select participants for participation in this study. Ten (10) students were sampled to participate in the focus group semi-structured interviews. An interview schedule was used to engage the participants in the interview. Data analysis was analysed through *Atlas.ti* which was loaded on the computer, and the whole process of data analysis involved identifying common codes and themes.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This sub-section presents the analysis and interpretation of the qualitative data collected through focus group semi-structured interviews with ten (10) students. The results of the study are discussed in accordance to the themes that were established. Table 1 provides codes for students who participated in the interview.

### Theme 1: Codes of participants to focus group semi-structured interviews

There was an equal number of participants' gender, while 40 percent (four participants) of the participants were aged 19. In addition, 20 percent (two participants) were aged 20 and 22 respectively. The remaining 20 percent (two par-

**Table 1: Age, gender and number of years in which learners are repeating Grade 12**

Participants' codes	Age	Gender	Year in which they wrote their first Grade 12 examinations
PS 1	20	Male	2012
PS 2	19	Male	2013
PS 3	22	Male	2012
PS 4	20	Male	2013
PS 5	19	Male	2013
PS 6	19	Female	2010
PS 7	23	Female	2013
PS 8	19	Female	2013
PS 9	22	Female	2013
PS 10	21	Female	2012

ticipants) were 22 and 23 of age respectively. Six of the participants wrote their matric examinations in 2013 while three of them wrote the 2012 matric examination, with the exception of one participant who wrote the 2010 examination.

### Theme 2: Examinations written by students

Participants indicated that they wrote NCS examinations, however, in the year 2014, they were required to write CAPS examinations. Eight of the participants were re-writing matric examination for the first time while the remaining two were re-writing the matric examination for the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> time respectively. Looking at the results, one may speculate that the two participants who were re-writing the matric examination for the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> time, respectively, were eager to attain the matric certificate. It was quite surprising that the students who were taught and also wrote the NCS syllabus would be expected to write the CAPS examinations without any support and guidance from schools, particularly from their teachers.

### Theme 3: Reasons why participants did not go back to school to repeat Grade 12

Participants provided different reasons why they did not go back to school in order to repeat Grade 12. The most dominant reason mentioned by students was that the principals refused them permission to go back to school and repeat Grade 12. The following were responses from participants:

*PS1: The principal didn't allow me to go back to school to do Grade 12.*

*PS4: The principal told me that if I had to go back to class fulltime, I had to start from Grade 10 because the syllabus has changed and one has to know everything as the Grade 12 syllabus starts from Grade 10.*

*PS5: The principal told me that the pass rate I attained didn't allow me to go back to class, I should write supplementary examination, which I did and then failed. That is why I had to register to re-write matric examination here.*

*PS9: In my school, I was never allowed and I don't know why as I was simply told that I don't qualify. There were no further explanations.*

*PS10: The principal didn't want me to go back to class and no explanation was made as*



*to why I was not allowed. What I know is that you don't repeat Grade 12 in my school.*

These results indicate that students were willing to go back to school and repeat Grade 12 but were denied such opportunities to do so by the principals of their respective schools. Researchers speculate that principals of the schools were afraid that if they allow these students to repeat Grade 12, this might affect their schools' matric results as some of those students who are repeating might fail. Principals are under pressure to improve their learners' Grade 12 results, and Mouton et al. (2013) state that the deteriorating quality of education results from under-prepared learners whom are products of internal promotion practices and the need by schools to achieve high pass rates, especially in Grade 12. One can speculate that this is one of the reasons why some principals of schools are reluctant to admit Grade 12 learners who failed their exams but want to repeat the grade.

#### **Theme 4: Challenges encountered when re-writing their Grade 12 examinations**

##### ***Sub-theme 4A: Change of Syllabus***

Participants expressed that the biggest challenge they were facing was that they were writing CAPS examinations while they were taught the NCS syllabus. Participants were shocked that some of the chapters they did in the previous years were no longer there or were removed, and new chapters were added.

*PS2: change of syllabus... and there are certain things that have been taken out like in Economics subject.*

*PS3: in Mathematics there was linear programming and such has been taken off the syllabus and now there are new things that has been added and which we were never taught at all.*

*PS5: In Accounting, there are changes as well like some equation formation which is very problematic to me.*

*PS8: The change of syllabus and there are certain new things in Mathematics that has been taken off the syllabus while in Economics there are two papers and it is confusing for us as to how do we answer some of the questions that are there.*

These results indicate that students who are re-writing matric examinations are confused

about the changes in the syllabus as they were never warned and guided regarding such changes. The results may suggest that those students might have been preparing themselves, not in accordance with the current syllabus, but were busy revising some of the aspects that are no longer being examined. On the other hand, they might have been taught by teachers who are not adequately trained in line with the current curriculum. These might not be necessarily surprising when one looks at eNews Channel Africa (eNCA) (2013) which reports that teachers are struggling to teach a curriculum in which they have not been trained to teach, and that they often had to manage more than 100 pupils per class.

##### ***Sub-theme 4B: Preparations towards Writing 2014 Examinations***

###### *Class Attendance*

Nine participants stated that they were attending some classes at one of the Further Education and Training (FET) colleges which double up as Centres that provide classes to students who are repeating Grade 12 around Dzindi Circuit. Participants indicated that they registered two to four subjects in January. Only one of the participant indicated that he was studying on his own. Participants had this to say:

*PS2: I was attending classes at one of the FET College from January, and they were teaching us the NCS syllabus.*

*PS3: I was also registered at the same FET and the focus there was on NCS syllabus and not on CAPS...but I am surprised that now we are forced to write CAPS examination. No one told me to prepare this way.*

These results show that those students were simply just attending classes and were being taught subjects from the new syllabus. The most worrying factor is that they did not know that they were going to write a different type of examination from what they were taught in the previous year.

###### *Burdensome School Fees*

Nine participants stated that in order for them to attend the classes at the FET College, they had to pay a lot of money. This included school fees or tuition fees. They reported the cost to be

R1000 per subject, accommodation or transportation if they are not in boarding, food as well as any additional expenses that included making copies such as previous exam papers. Participants had this to say:

*PS2: I had to pay transportation money, school fees had to be paid and the sad part is when I had to be taught things that are irrelevant to what I am writing now...that is very bad...all in all I paid R4000 for four subjects and then R277 for bus ticket per month for almost ten months.*

*PS3: It was bad because I had rented a room, there is food to eat and school fees that has to be paid so I spent more than R7000 including accommodation, food, guides and school fees or tuition fees.*

*PS4: I had to pay school fees, then rent, buying food and then we are taught things that are not in line with what we are being examined on. I spent R9750 for everything*

*PS5: I paid R6000 which included R2000 for two subjects as well as R277 for bus ticket for eight (8) months which was to me the biggest problem and the worst part is that when we reach the school we are not being taught.*

*PS9: In my case I spent R4000 for four subjects, R300 for accommodation (11 months) as well as more than R300 for food each month.*

These results show that those students are desperate to attain the Grade 12 certificate and are ready to spend any amount of money just to pass their examinations. The results also show that they are more than willing to pay whatever they are charged and to travel long distances in order for them to attain the Grade 12 certificate. This should be seen against the backdrop of many rural communities who lack support through governance structures and books and learning materials that they need in order to provide the necessary parental support and care for their children (Surty 2012). This surely suggests that parents of these students had to dig deep into their pockets to pay such hefty tuition fees in order to ensure that their kids attain the Grade 12 National Senior Certificate.

#### *Lack of Support from Department of Basic Education*

Participants stated that they were never supported by the Department of Basic Education. Having registered to re-write matric examina-

tions, they expected to be supported with books, enrichment classes or extra classes that are conducted on the weekends as well as on holidays. Some of the participants indicated that they had to pay for their winter classes as these provided the only available opportunity for enrichment. The following were some of the comments from participants:

*PS1: Lack of support from the Department of Basic Education in terms of provision of adequate reading materials such as books, study guides and enrichment classes has been one of the biggest challenges we faced. We expected that in one way or the other the Department of Basic Education will be able to support us...but unfortunately there was no support.*

*PS5: I would probably say that the biggest challenge was lack of support from DBE which may results in us failing again these examinations. Most seriously, we thought that we were going to write NCS examination only to find out that we are confronted with CAPS examinations.*

These responses show that students who are re-writing matric examinations are not supported in any way possible by the DBE. This shows that students are just being left alone to fend for themselves as they were required to pay for their own enrichment classes, buy themselves some learner-guides, and had to write examinations of a syllabus that they were not taught. These results are quite interesting as Cohen and Seria (2010) state that in almost all the provinces, resources are not the problem, but it is the prioritisation of those funds that is important, with a large portion of funds swallowed by the dark articulate cronies of the education system who speak the political language. On the basis of this statement, researchers could not help but think that resources that can help those students to pass might be available, but it might be that they are being redirected somewhere else.

#### *Views on Whether Participants Should Have Been Allowed to Attend Classes*

Participants indicated that the least that the DBE should have done was to allow them to attend some classes. Allowing those students to attend classes would have helped them to gain valuable knowledge of the CAPS syllabus, and some of them would have known that there

are possibilities that they may write new examination based on CAPS. Participants acknowledged that they did not try to ask for permission to attend some classes due to fear of being turned down by the school principals.

Participants noted the following:

*PS1: Yes, Saturday class or even daily classes would have been beneficial as that would have given us some chance to be taught curriculum that is relevant to what has been set in the examination papers.*

*PS2: We would have approached the principal if we have known that we are going to write CAPS examinations, but we didn't know that, all we knew was that we are going to write NCS examination.*

*PS6: I wished that we who have registered as part-time or private candidates were allowed to attend some of the classes at schools that are nearer to where we stay.*

*PS7: I think we should have been provided with at least a chance to attend some enrichment classes such as the Saturday and winter classes. So it's very bad as we didn't know that we were going to write CAPS examinations. Only had we known.*

*PS10: There should have been classes prepared for us because the DBE for sure knew that we are going to write CAPS examinations. They should have told us to go and attend some of the classes for specific subjects that we have registered for. I also think that even the stationery; we should have been supplied with some as I don't think we could have used a lot of that.*

These responses show that participants should have been provided with some kind of support such as enrichment classes, for example, Saturday and winter classes to help them understand aspects that have been added or removed from the syllabus. However, Khosa (2012) notes that even in the schools, curriculum delivery is also poor, with teachers not completing their curriculum and pitching their teaching at levels lower than those demanded by the curriculum. This is sometimes compounded by the low quality of the training workshops that takes place in several provinces, a fact that always invites scathing attacks from teacher unions (Bongani 2012).

#### *Participants' Chances of Passing the Examinations*

All the participants expressed hope that they will pass their examinations although they indi-

cated that they did not think that they would do as well as they expected to. Participants had this to say:

*PS1: I'm bit confident that I can make it as the majority of aspects in the examination are things that I just checked a little bit.*

*PS2: yeah, I think I can pass but not in the way I expected to pass because there are more new things that have been added that are confusing to me.*

*PS3: yes, but not in the way I expected.*

*PS4: I will pass but I'll not reach my expectations.*

*PS9: I might pass but not in the way I wanted to pass.*

These results indicate that although participants are confident of passing their examinations, they doubt whether they will be able to improve on their results. This is clearly articulated by the use of the conjunction "but" which shows that they have doubts.

#### *Intervention Strategies to Help Students Who Are Re-writing Grade 12 Examinations*

Participants indicated that the DBE and principals of the schools should support students who are registered to re-write Grade 12 examinations. Participants mentioned that resources such as books, study guides and enrichment classes should be provided to all students who are registered to re-write Grade 12 exams. Participants had this to say:

*PS1: Students registered to re-write Grade 12 exams should be supported by the DBE. For instance, if students have registered for NCS exam, special dispensation should be made to ensure that such students write the said examinations and not the other way round. Again, study guides, textbooks, and enrichment classes should be provided to all the students who register to re-write their examination*

*PS3: Things like study guides and any study material that can be helpful to students should be provided by the Department of Basic Education. If books are provided from the centres where we register to write, and then it means we will be able to return them when we come to write.*

*PS4: I think the Department should introduce Saturday classes for students who are to re-write their Grade 12 examinations... remember we are from the government schools and we*

are registered to re-write our examination in a government centres. I think it is the responsibility of the Department of Basic Education to help us.

*PS5: The Department of Basic Education or whosoever is responsible should recognise that we didn't write the NCS examinations, so they must consider giving us marks to compensate for our trouble with the CAPS examination. So when they are marking our scripts, they should consider that we didn't write the kind of exam of the syllabus we were taught about.... and should therefore credit us with the marks to improve our pass rate.*

*PS8: The Department of Basic Education should give us study guides and we should be told in due time that we are going to write CAPS and NCS examination so that we do get surprised.*

These results show that participants would prefer to be offered some kind of support by the Department of Basic Education as they are still part of the education system. Any assistance and resources provided to mainstream Grade 12 students should also be provided to them as well. Price and Clark (2011) note that in order to raise the quality of educational provision to black children in the country's public schools, learning and teaching materials such as text- and workbooks should be adequately provided. Van der Berg and Spaull (2011) note that access to textbooks improves reading performance, however, the South African government's efforts to supply textbooks in schools have often foundered when such books are not given to learners to use and take home.

### CONCLUSION

Students who are re-writing Grade 12 examinations are facing a lot of challenges which include, amongst other things, lack of support from the Department of Basic Education as well as their respective schools. They are not being provided with study books or guides to prepare themselves, have no enrichment classes, and had to write examinations of syllabus that is different from the one they were taught about. In order for them to be taught, they had to register at some FET colleges where the tuition fees are very expensive.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

The paper recommends that learners who fail Grade 12 should be given a second chance to

repeat matric, and principals should not deny learners who want to do so. It is recommended that students who are re-writing Grade 12 examinations should be provided with adequate resources such as study textbooks, study guides and enrichment classes by Department of Basic Education. Such students should also be allowed to attend classes in any public schools of their choice in preparation for their exams. Students who are re-writing Grade 12 exams should write examination papers that are of the syllabus they were taught on. The Department of Basic Education should make it its priority to ensure that all students registered to re-write Grade 12 examinations are afforded all the necessary support that can help such students to pass their exams. The study also recommends that matric finishing centres be re-opened, and unused buildings of the defunct colleges should be used to offer classes to learners who are to re-write Grade 12 examinations.

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