

Student Distress on Grade Twelve Studies and Examinations

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ABSTRACT Grade twelve is the most critical qualification that students obtain in South Africa because it is the last year of basic education. Grade twelve studies and examinations are therefore the most important experience in the school career of any student. The stress levels reach a climax as the examination results of students are released. Unfortunately media, parents and politicians measure the effectiveness of education against student performance in the grade twelve. This paper employed qualitative research and focus group interviews for data collection. The findings in this paper suggest that stress is the cause for the students in the schools to perform poorly in grade twelve studies and examinations. It is recommended in this paper that students need an on-going support and motivation to build on their self-esteem and let them actualise their capabilities.

INTRODUCTION

Students who write their final year examinations globally experience stress and anxiety to survive. This is an external examination which implies that neither the teachers nor the students know the content of the examination. It is assumed that the examiner would be more objective in his assessment and therefore the assessment would be more reliable. This adds pressure on the teachers as well as the students as they lose sight of the importance of learning. Students memorise facts instead of understanding information so that they could use it in life situations. These students who are overly concerned, experience emotional stress (Lazarus and Volkmann 2016; Brown and Grumet 2009).

Students are faced with a variety of contextual factors which influence their performance in the final examination. This in turn increases distress and anxiety. Some degree of examination stress is inevitable and this is experienced by almost everybody who writes exams. Some people experience it more severely than others, depending on the type of pressure the stakeholder is exposed to (McDonald 2010). In the case of the final year examination, stress should not result in physical symptoms such as lack of sleep, anxiety, lack of appetite and headaches (Quiroz 2016; Arjunan and Francis 2009).

Teachers in the school are legally loco parentis (in place of a parent) to students in their care (South African Schools Act 1996). Unfortunately the school cannot always counteract the ill

effects of social maladjustment and poor home environment. Aalsma et al. (2014) believe that our education system is out of balance. It focuses on high academic standards and increased student achievements. The system should bring some joy of learning back into the system. One major factor that is overlooked during the examination is the well-being of the students. According to Parkinson and Creswell (2011), students need to be content in their school environment, for the reason that contentment is psychologically healthy, which leads to high self-esteem and vigour or it can lead to psychological distress in the form of hopelessness, tension, anger and confusion.

Grade twelve students experience frustration when performance levels are not within target, usually resulting from emotional or social disturbances. Therefore, some authors support the idea that when students are demotivated, their performance at school will be negatively affected (Rucker 2016; Brown and Grumet 2009). Legotlo et al. (2002) equally suggest that in South Africa more emphasis is needed on strategies which will help to improve grade twelve student performance in the final examinations.

Literature Review

Aspects That Causes Stress

The grade twelve students have more pressure than just facing the examination and preparing themselves for this rapidly changing

world of high technology. According to Norberg et al. (2013), these students have to cope with other social burdens in volatile environments such as alcohol, smoking and drugs.

Preliminary Examination

South African students are annually exposed to externally set preliminary examinations written in September, before the final examination at the end of the year. This examination is intended to prepare them for their finals (Department of Education 2005). According to Legotlo et al. (2002), this examination can be disorientating and stressful for the students. Students who failed their preliminary examination experience stress and anxiety related to the examination and continue to suffer during the preparation for their final grade twelve studies and examinations. It tends to demoralise and frustrates students and they even begin to doubt their capabilities to further their studies in the future (Spindly 2016).

Peer Pressure

Students in grade twelve are typically adolescents. Peer relations are essential for adolescents and could have a positive or negative impact on them (Colins et al. 2014). Morosanova (2013) indicates that many young people are afraid of choosing to move out of an activity due to risking peer approval or rejection. Morosanova (2013) further points out that, in a social climate the immediate rewards of acceptance by a peer group outweigh the values of both the immediate and long-term rewards for performance of social norms. During youth, peers become a major influence because of the increased time spent with them outside the home.

Negative peer pressure can cause a student to rebel against school and class rules in order to prove their self-worth to the peer group. These in turn lead to a lack of academic success which frustrates and stresses students. Brown and Grumet (2009) relate that negative peer pressure could influence others to bunk school, copy homework, cheating in examinations, and partake in smoking, unwanted sex, drinking and/or drug abuse. This could lead to depression and anxiety that in turn result in suicide and poor academic performance (Langley 2016).

People abuse drugs for various reasons such as curiosity, conformity, peer pressure, rebel-

liousness and to combat stress. In adolescence it is either for approval of peers, defying authority such as parents, teachers and other adults, or as a way of coping with examination stress. Substance abuse needs to be the central concern of education, as it contributes to other social problems such as crime, violence, unsafe sexual behaviour, deterioration in scholastic performance and interpersonal relationships (Steinberg 2010). Steinberg (2010) further indicates that the fact that all drugs are expensive leads to young addicts needing money to sustain their addiction. It further leads to theft, involvement in crime or violence. The misuse of substances leads to a drop in concentration and motivation which results in losing the positive value of schooling. The misuse of drugs may result in students' deterioration of interpersonal relationships with family members, peer group and school relationships. They could also suffer other social problems such as impulsive violence and other forms of intolerance (Timothy 2016; Steinberg 2010).

Socio-economic Context

Many of our grade twelve students have more to worry about in their socio-economic context than passing their final year examination. Many of their parents/caregivers cannot afford the costs of schooling. The students sometimes head the family with a small social grant or an irregular payment from a family member. Many a times they are hungry in class or they cannot afford to pay school funds or photocopying of notes. These students become demotivated as they realise that there is no money for tertiary education. It emotionally drains the students that have the potential to further their studies (Zenlea et al. 2014).

Parental Neglect and Pressure

According to the Department of Education (2005), the parent plays a vital role in the education of the student. Many of our parents are too busy earning a living. Neglect occurs when a parent or other primary caretaker chooses not to fulfil their obligations to care for, provide for, or adequately supervise and monitor the activities of their child. Parental and care giving obligations include the physical, emotional, and educational well-being of the child. Thus, neglect

can also occur when the parent or caretaker does not seek adequate medical or dental care for the child (Lazarus and Volkmann 2016).

Another way of looking at neglect is when the parental figure does not provide sufficient food, clothing, or shelter. Parents are also expected to provide for the emotional needs of the child. Thus, neglect can occur when parents abandon the child, or simply have no time to spend with the child, in essence leaving the child to raise himself (McDonald 2010). If the child is actually left without supervision, this certainly constitutes neglect as well. One more feature of neglect includes educational neglect, which often occurs when one child is responsible for other children in the family. The responsibility of caring for younger children shifts to another child in the family. This prevents the care giving child from participating in their own age-appropriate activities, such as attending school. This is a relatively common situation that makes it difficult for the oldest and perhaps all of the children to attend school. Parental responsibility includes children being provided with adequate guidance and supervision by a parent and to ensure that the child regularly attends school. Truancy is not only a problem for children, but may be part of the picture of neglect as well (Spindly 2016; Galla et al. 2012).

Neglect is generally cumulative, and it often negatively affects the child's development. Poor nutrition is a normal occurrence and has negative consequences on the child's physical and psychological development. If proper nutrients are not available at critical growth periods, the child's development will not follow the normal and usual pattern. Common physical and psychological reactions to neglect include stunted growth, chronic medical problems, inadequate bone and muscle growth, and lack of neurological development that negatively affects normal brain functioning and information processes (Faber 2010). Processing problems may often make it difficult for children to understand directions, may negatively impact the child's ability to understand social relationships, or may make completion of some academic tasks impossible without assistance or intervention from others. Lack of adequate medical care may result in long-term health problems or impairments such as hearing loss from untreated ear infections (Lazarus and Volkmann 2016; Chesney et al. 2014).

The long-term mental health effects of neglect are inconsistent. Effects of neglect can range from chronic depression to difficulty with relationships; however, not all adults neglected as children will suffer from these results. Some individuals are more resilient than others and are able to move beyond the emotional neglect they may have experienced. Characteristics of resilient individuals include an optimistic or hopeful outlook on life, and feeling challenged rather than defeated by problems (Bava and Tapert 2010).

During examination times students are under pressure from all angles. Cultural background influences parents to pressurise their children to achieve academically. This places unnecessary stress on their child. Some parents exercise strict discipline over children's dedication to achievement. Unfortunately these parents do not control the levels between anxiety/ depression and student performance. Parental pressure may be associated with adolescent depression and anxiety due to the fact that the importance of both child obedience and educational status. The link between parental academic expectations and an adolescent mental health calls for the intervention of family therapy. Such parents train their child with the concern of the child's future success (DeSousa et al. 2013).

Behane (2006), a senior counsellor at the South African Depression and Anxiety Group reported that annually when grade twelve students write their final examinations, there is an increase in calls from students. She criticised parents for pressurising their children to achieve. The students are scared that their results will not satisfy their parents. On the day of the results, everyone wants to see their name in the newspaper - not finding your name in there is degrading and shameful (Galla et al. 2012).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The qualitative approach was preferred for this study because it allowed the researcher to explore student distress in grade twelve studies and examinations. In this study, the researcher was interested in the meanings of the narratives of the participants and the qualitative approach enabled the researcher to remain committed to the viewpoints of the participants in order to understand what influences them to display their student distress in grade twelve studies and

examinations. The qualitative approach also enabled the researcher to use two methods of data collection, namely, focus group interviews and observation, in order to acquire an in-depth understanding of student distress in grade twelve studies and examinations (Punch 2005).

Two rural high schools were selected purposefully from 19 high schools for this study. The population of this study was all students from the two selected high schools. In this study, purposeful sampling was used to select two rural high schools in the North-West province, South Africa. Purposeful sampling was used to select the appropriate students for this study. This method or technique allows a researcher to select the sample on the basis of the researcher's judgement about which ones are the most relevant or representative (Patton 2014). In this case, thirty six students in total, who the researcher believed were most useful, were selected.

According to Creswell (2016), purposeful sampling seeks information-rich cases for in-depth study and is used to ensure certain types of individuals or persons displaying certain attributes are included in the study. Creswell (2016) stated that the idea behind qualitative research is to purposefully select participants who will help the researcher to understand the research question. Based on the above discussion, the target population in this study was purposively chosen from the larger population, meaning few participants were selected and used as the sample for the study.

For this study, the researcher needed participants who had experienced distress in grade twelve studies and examinations. The researcher purposefully selected schools which had experienced the problem of student distress in grade twelve studies and examinations and as such were underperforming. When constructing the sample, the researcher considered first and foremost the purpose of the study and from each school, a total of eighteen participants was selected. The participants were chosen for various reasons, including the following: principals had all the information regarding dropouts from the school records as they are the ones who run the schools; educators had all the information about the patterns the dropout students had, meaning the signs and characteristics students at risk show through their behaviour in the classrooms. The researcher interviewed the partici-

pants several times over a three months period of data collection. The researcher also conducted several follow-up telephone interviews to solve some of the issues that emerged during the analysis of the data. The researcher also considered the availability of the informants. The informants in this study were relatively easy to identify and locate.

The data was collected through focus group interviews. A focus group is a form of qualitative research in which a group of people are asked about their perceptions, opinions, beliefs and attitudes towards a product, service, concept, advertisement, idea or packaging (Creswell 2016). Questions are asked in an interactive group setting where participants are free to talk with other group members. A focus group interview is further described as a form of interview that capitalises on communication between research participants in order to generate data. A focus group is a carefully planned discussion designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, non-threatening environment (Denzin and Lincoln 2011). To collect data the researcher visited the two high schools and conducted three focus group interviews in each school. At least three visits were made to each of the two schools and three groups of students were interviewed (Brinkman and Kvale 2014).

Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles that govern the treatment of human participants served as the basis for the methodological approach in this study. Participants were guaranteed a clear explanation of the purpose of the research and a clear choice as to whether they wanted to participate based on a full knowledge and understanding of what is involved (Merriam 1998). Participants were allowed to either give or withhold consent to participate without coercion. Participants were assured that participation is voluntarily and that refusal to participate or withdraw from the study would not result in any form of penalty (Creswell 2016). In addition, caring and fairness in the form of open discussions and negotiations with the research participants promoted fairness in the research process. The participants were informed that they had a choice to participate in the research voluntarily or to decline as they were not being forced to participate unwillingly. They were also informed of their right to with-

draw from participating in the research should they so desire. Privacy and confidentiality of participants were guaranteed during the research process (Creswell 2016).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The responses to the results of all focus group interviews were transcribed from audio recordings and field notes. Different categories relating to the research topic were formed and the information from the focus group interviews were analysed and fitted into these categories. This made information collected more relevant and useful as guidelines for students involved in grade twelve final examinations. The different themes that emerged from this data were used to gain an understanding of the factors that influence the causes of the grade twelve anxiety and the challenges experienced by the students (Dalen and Rumson 2016; Brinkman and Kvale 2014). Three main themes emerged from the focus group interviews, and they are inadequate resources, parental involvement and absenteeism.

Inadequate Resources

Students indicated that they would like to have more resources. They compared their school with other local high schools. Participant 8 indicated that, *“my school does not have some of the needed resources. The other school here is far better than my school.”* Participant 6 shared the similar feelings and she thought that, *“Compared to my school now, my previous school was adequately equipped. It is unfortunate that my parents had to relocate and settle here.”* Participant 9 reflected the same thoughts when he said that, *“In this school we do not have sufficient teaching aids or resources, even textbooks that we have are not enough and are most old. We cannot get all the knowledge that we need in order to pass grade twelve. We are not able to do practicals because we do not have equipment and chemicals. Do not even talk a laboratory. We do not have one. We do not know what is going to happen during the exams.”*

Students anxiously indicated the major role that can be played by the availability of material resources in their performance at the end of the year examinations (Derbies and Shanefell 2016).

Participant 12 explained that: *“The problem that we are facing in this school is that we cannot do experiments as we want, because of the shortage of resources. Perhaps these experiments would help us in our examinations, because when you write about something you have seen before, it’s quite easy to remember rather than to write about the things you have only read about in the books. The lack of a laboratory is portion of the problem, because there are also no apparatus or experiment supplies.”*

Participant 10 added that *“... we do not know the cause of these problems. May it is the fact that we in rural areas. In other schools students get everything they want including performing experiments in science subjects. In certain instances we need science kit besides the text books.”* Participant 7 continued that *“if anybody wants to solve our problems then the department of education must build a laboratory or buy mobile laboratory.”*

They commented that principals and school governing bodies need to prioritize the needs of the schools, since the norms and standards provided by the DoE are restricted to the specific items to be bought first. Students do not perform poorly only in mathematics and science subjects, but also in other subjects thus feeling overwhelmed by the time the examination arrives (Quiroz 2016; Carl 2005). Students felt that it is challenging to face the examination partially ready.

Participant 12 confirmed that they need to have sufficient resources in their school. They need chemicals and apparatus like test tubes. *“My cousin who is doing grade twelve like me in a town nearby tells me they do all the experiments in the textbook and I usually look like a fool. This increases my nervousness level more and more and especially when I think about the coming final exam at the end of the year.”* The participants suggested that it would be better if they all had resources in their schools. Participant 3 shared the same opinion that, *“at this time and era, the school should be equipped with resources such as computers, scientific calculators, because school research project needs computers and to have access to the internet.”*

Parental Involvement

Schools in this study are in poor areas and the students’ homes are far from school. Teach-

ers complained about the lack of parental participation, explaining that parents did not turn up for parental meetings and seemed to have no interest in their children's education. Parents are also expected to help their children with the control, monitoring of homework and supervising the studies of their children, as an additional support to the schools (Lazarus and Volkmann 2016). The parents should also attend meetings as requested by the school management team and parents should arrange additional tuition in identified subjects based on the performance of the student (Department of Basic Education 2013). The teachers should work with the school governing body, especially because the school governing body is the body representing the parents. Parents must know about all the problems related to teaching and learning at school.

Participant 7 attested that certain parents are sometimes negligent because *"whenever I tell my parents to come to school meetings, they tell me that they will be working. I always wonder whether the parents who attend school meetings are the unemployed ones only. This makes me feel like my parents do not care about my education."* Participant 16 agreed that one student requested some teachers to speak to her mother avowing that *"her mother usually does the washing as a domestic worker and soon as she gets paid, she goes to a shebeen and use all the money to buy alcohol."*

In this rural area many of the students live without parents, others live with their grandmothers and the students take advantage by coming home late. They usually wait for weeks for their parents to sign school documents because students don't live with their parents. Participant 2 indicated that, *"I live alone without my parents or guardians in a rented house that is not favourable for learning."* Participant 12 also complained about his parents not being able to help him and said that, *"although my parents do assist me with whatever they have, they find it very difficult to assist me to pass the school subjects. They are illiterate and for them it does not matter whether I pass or fail mathematics and physics because they do not understand the importance of continuing further with school. They recognize mathematics and physical science as the same as all other subjects."*

It also appeared that some of the students were struggling to make ends meet and did not eat supper and breakfast. A common concern

was that some students don't have parents, while others are usually neglected by their parents who are living below the breadline (Langley 2016). There were students who came to school without lunch boxes every day. The researcher observed that there were female teachers who took care of the girls affected by poverty.

Lemmer (2009) recommended that parental involvement could be achieved by creating positive relationships between parents and teachers and by encouraging direct parental involvement in their children's learning process. Participant 12 confirmed that *"I have been inviting parents of certain students to school. And spoke to them about their children as individuals and I discovered that those parents become more involved when they know that I know them personally then when they attended the general school meetings."*

Parental involvement can make classroom teaching more effective, especially with grade twelve students who have a heavy work load. Regrettably, some parents have never attended school themselves and so they do not know how to read, write or count properly. Most parents in this rural area where the two schools are located are illiterate and are unable to assist their children properly. This creates an inferiority complex and results in parents being reluctant to involve themselves with school work. Mji and Makgato (2006) stress that although parental involvement is definitely crucial, there are many shortfalls. In general, they do not possess the necessary education themselves and thus they find it difficult to understand what is done at school. Participant 6 commented that: *"when my parents are called to open days, parents who come are those that their children perform better in their school work, the parents whose children perform bad are mostly absent in school events."* Participant 2 added that, *"my mother said that she was too sick to come to school and she indicated that she would send somebody on her behalf and that did not happen."*

It is clear that parent involvement is an indispensable tool for successful studies and ultimately grade twelve examinations. Parent involvement must therefore be done in consultation with teachers so that informal education is linked to formal education. In this regard parents need to be responsible for their children's education. Parents need to be part of planning at school level and see to it that their children go

to school. Parents should monitor their children's school work and also encourage their children to take their studies seriously. Their participation may lessen the distress and suffering that is allegedly associated with grade twelve studies and examination (Timothy 2016).

Absenteeism

Doran (2011) maintains that the negative impact of the loss of days in school due to absenteeism has been universally acknowledged and it has been linked to poor performance, stress and anguish in grade twelve studies.

"My school is located far away from the village where I stay. I have to travel long distances to and from school all this distances in all kinds of weather. And sometimes the answer to extreme weather conditions is to stay at home" (Participant 10).

Booyse et al. (2012) argues that drug abuse in schools affects students, especially those in higher grades. Grade twelve students who are exposed to drugs and alcohol are not eager to attend school. Such grade twelve students may become withdrawn, isolated or inattentive in class. These effects will impact negatively on their motivation and ability to learn, on their socialisation with peers, the quality of their relationships with adults at their school and eventually on their grade twelve results (Rucker 2016).

"Due to the fact that there is an increasing rate of drugs abuse such as marijuana (dagga), alcohol and cigarette smoking among students, the rate of absenteeism is too high. Students are missing the classes, intimidated and bullied by other students. The big worry is that if these drugs are used frequently, the students will not only learn how to cope with the stress and problems of everyday life, but would be disturbed from attending the school."

"Some students have been absent for valid reason such as that they went to bed on hungry stomachs the previous day and nothing to eat before going to school. Others are absent because of pregnancy and have to visit the antenatal classes or they do not have learning materials required by teachers or else they did not do the task or homework" (Participant 9).

Fulani and Hendricks (2011) believe that schools need to take a comprehensive approach to involve parents and the community in ways that help students reduce absenteeism. By con-

ducting a wide range of involvement activities schools may enable more parents and community partners to encourage, mentor and support student attendance. Participant 6 suggested that, *"Parents and teachers, schools and families, exercise an influence in education and each has their own special contribution to make. Moreover, the most effective education occurs when families and schools work together in a shared enterprise"* (Participant 11).

Participants revealed that absenteeism has a negative impact on grade twelve studies and eventually good performance in the examination. They therefore recommended that frequent and positive communication with parents about attendance is needed to reduce chronic absenteeism. This idea is supported by James and Poland (2006). They insist that the effects of school, family and community partnerships on student attendance should be included. Therefore, a larger and more diverse sample of schools and a more extensive set of partnership activities focused on school attendance cannot be ignored for quality performance (Spindly 2016). They further believed that providing awards and incentives for students, and referring truant students and their families to a counsellor, are a good example of partnership activities to reduce absenteeism, thus increasing students' performance. One of the grade twelve students indicated that:

"Teachers are required to deal with students and parents from diverse cultural backgrounds. Some parents may come from completely different backgrounds with different values, and traditions, different languages and communication styles, and even different expectations and views on education. If teachers are knowledgeable about such parents, there would be effective communication as well as working together and absenteeism may be reduced in this regard."

To conclude, the findings of the study show that the grade twelve students are emotionally stressed and disturbed during and after their studies, the examination, as well as when the results are released. Participants agreed that they wanted to pass well but they had some challenges. The response of the students further indicated that they had a serious problem being examined in English. The students had difficulty understanding the questions and interpreting them. Some students were not co-operative when they had extra classes. It was clear that

these students did not yet realise that the quality of their results depended on the amount of effort they put into preparation for the examination. Students also do not manage their time well. They do not balance their time between school, homework, work and personal time. The findings also showed that students panicked as they did not start studying well in advance. During examinations they then realised that they had too much work to study and too little time to prepare. Only a few students said that they were undisturbed by the examination and that they felt in control of their school work (Lazarus and Volkman 2016).

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this research study was to explore the relationship between stress levels of grade twelve students, their studies and examination. It was evident from this study that there were a number of challenges that had a negative impact on the stress levels of the grade twelve students. Some of those challenges included improvement on the in-service training programmes for teachers and on-going support for teachers, moral support for teachers and students, resourcing, restructuring of physical structures like libraries, laboratories and other related issues.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Schools need career guidance teachers to support students who are in need of support. Students need on-going support and motivation as they come from different backgrounds. Career guidance needs to build on students' self-esteem and let the individuals actualise their capabilities. They also need to train students from their early days of school how to manage their time, how to study, to concentrate in class, to recognise their goals for the year and learn coping skills. The Department of Education needs to take all twelve years of the student's school career as equally important. More effort and money should be invested in all the grades as it prepares a better end product. This would relieve the stress caused by the grade twelve studies and examinations on the students. Communities need to be more involved in their schools.

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