

An Investigation into the Study Patterns and Habits of Grade 8 and 9 Learners in South Africa: Are They Studying?

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ABSTRACT Much has been documented on the dismal education system in South Africa and how the country's Senior Phase learners are performing poorly in the international benchmarked tests. This paper aimed at investigating the study patterns and habits of Grade 8 and 9 learners in rural secondary schools. A purposive random sampling procedure was utilised to sample 45 Grade 8 and 9 learners from nine rural secondary schools. Five learners from each secondary school completed closed-ended self-administered questionnaires for this quantitative survey study. The findings of the study revealed that Senior Phase (Grade 8 and 9) learners are not being motivated and assisted by their parents to learn study. The study recommends that Senior Phase learners should be assisted with adopting study skills and strategies that can benefit them while studying. Reading material should be provided in order to instil love of reading among learners.

INTRODUCTION

The state of education in South Africa is of nationwide concern, as almost 80 percent of learners are judged to be at serious risk of not learning to read as measured by international benchmarks (Pattillo 2012; Van der Berg and Spaul 2011). One example of such evidence can be seen in the number of learners who drop out before they reach matric (Grade 12). Patillo (2012) states that of the estimated 1.1 million learners who enrolled in school in 1998, only 24 percent eventually passed their matric examinations 12 years later in 2010. The magnitude of the crisis in education is shocking, as the country's scores are among the lowest in the world on international tests (The Economist 2010). Fredericks (2014) states that the poor Senior Phase level results of 2013 could have been expected, as the majority of these learners were part of the education system for the past nine years during which very little attention was given to intervention in primary schools and the drive was to improve matric results. Fredericks (2014: x) cites Minister of Basic Education, Ms Angie Motshekga: "With Grade 9, I was extremely disappointed. I thought we understood where the problems were, I thought we

had put interventions in place and I was completely saddened [when I saw the results]"

The poor results at the Senior Phase level (grades 7–9) are blamed on poor teaching, which is resultant of ineffective teaching methods used by teachers (Bolowana 2014). On the other hand, teachers are also blamed, as they are seen to be concentrating and paying more attention to Grade 11 and 12 learners, much to the detriment of Senior Phase learners. Furthermore, poor performance is also caused by problems with language processing, as all subjects require language skills to help learners produce the desired answers to any academic activities given to them by teachers (Fredericks 2014).

It is worth noting that the challenges of students or learners who are not doing well in school is a world phenomenon. Loveless (2017) notes that the 2017 Brown Center Report on American Education shows that American students are not necessarily doing well in schools as they are not devoting most of their time in school work, concentrating more on sports. Moreover, the 2017 Grattan Institute Report finds that in Australia, the vast number of students are consistently disengaged in class and are unproductive in a given year (Goss et al. 2017).

Learners' Poor Vocabulary and Lack of Motivation to Learn English

Navsaria et al. (2011) state that one of the issues identified as a contributing factor to learners' failure to achieve the academic outcomes in South Africa is the written language. Chang (2010) indicates that reasons for learners' weakness in English language learning stem from learners' laziness, lack of efficiency of the school and insufficiency of parents' promotions. Souriyavongsa et al. (2013) note that the majority of secondary school learners have a problem with basic vocabulary skills, which influences reading comprehension. In a study conducted in the Western Cape by Navsaria et al. (2011), teachers indicated that between 50 and 70 percent of learners in their classes were not meeting grade-level academic outcomes. One of the key findings of the study was that there are barriers and challenges at the school system, individual learner and home/social/community levels that are contributing significantly to the academic outcomes of learners (Navsaria et al. 2011). Some of the major challenges that were identified at the school-system level included limited training of and lack of support for teachers, poor foundation skills in learners and difficulties with language (Navsaria et al. 2011). Navsaria et al. (2011) indicate that in 2003, the South African Department of Education investigated literacy levels among Grade 3 learners and found that 61 percent of these learners did not have age-appropriate reading and writing skills (Howie and Plomp 2006). Mullis et al. 2007) state that the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study reported the results of reading from South Africa, which showed that the country has the lowest reading literacy levels of all 40 countries investigated; this despite the fact that the South African Grade 5 learners were compared to Grade 4 learners internationally (Scherman et al. 2008). Navsaria et al. (2011) note that South African learners were found to be more than two grades behind their international peers in terms of reading. As reading and written language are closely related, it is likely that their written language skills would also be compromised. Souvannasy et al. Masashi and Yukiko (2008) state that teaching and learning English implementation still face shortages of textbooks, unqualified English teachers and unstandardized curricula. Nor-mazidah et al. (2012) and Souriyavongsa et al.

(2013) provide the following factors that cause learners to show poor performance in English language learning: the fact that English is regarded as a difficult subject to learn; learners' learning depends on English teachers as authorities; lack of support to use English in the home environment and the community; learners have insufficient or no exposure to the language, as there are limited opportunities to use English outside the classrooms; learners have a limitation of vocabulary proficiency; English reading materials are not always available; learners have an unwillingness and lack of motivation to learn English, as they do not see the immediate need to use the language; and lack of motivation for learning or a negative attitudes towards the target language. Navsaria et al. (2011) study highlighted eight main barriers that impinge on learners at the school system level, which included aspects such as teachers having received insufficient training and therefore not being able to support learners effectively, a lack of resources at the school, and disrupted and incompetent teaching. While most of the barriers identified centred on the school level, another barrier was at the social/home/community level where difficulties such as lack of parental support and socio-economic hardships were seen to impact on the learners (Navsaria et al. 2011).

Non-existence of a Culture of Learning and Teaching

Van Deventer and Kruger (2003) note that a serious challenge facing South African schools is the restoration of a sound culture of learning and teaching. Heystek and Lethoko (2001) indicate that one of the main goals of education in South African schools today is to restore a culture of learning and teaching. Lethoko et al. (2001) state that in order to restore a culture of learning and teaching, the conditions and disciplines of compulsory schooling, regular attendance, punctuality and acceptance of authority to bear on teachers and learners should be brought back to schools. Niemann and Kotzé (2006) state that it is unfortunate that there are numerous dysfunctional schools where a culture of learning and teaching has essentially broken down. Kruger (2003) also found that one of the major challenges confronting educators is the need for creating a sound culture of learning and teaching in which effective education can take

cent learners to study harder than younger children, it is however very difficult for them to persevere in heavy learning tasks, because they are easily affected by things around them.

Utilising Study Time

The results in Table 2 show that the majority of the respondents (95.6%) disagreed that they study on the weekends. Apart from that, 86.7 percent indicated that they do not study during the morning study time, while 80 percent said they do not study during the afternoon. These results would indicate that the Senior Phase level (Grade 8 and 9) learners do not study at all, which would explain their dismal literacy proficiency performance in their tests as well as in their examinations. The results would explain the reasons why Minister of Basic Education, Ms Angie Motshegka, notes that there is a disturbing trend in the Senior Phase, particularly among Grade 8 and 9 learners, where the education system is facing major challenges, and that all stakeholders have to give it the utmost attention in ensuring that performance is enhanced (Department of Basic Education (DBE) 2014). The results also show that learners who are in the Senior Phase level (Grade 8 and 9) are not utilising ample time for studying, which would explain their dismal literacy proficiency performance and why they are failing their grades. This mainly due to the fact that the number of the disengaged students are inattentive and lacked motivation, and are often one or two years of schooling behind their peers (Goss et al. 2017).

Parental Supervision While Studying

The results in Table 3 show that 24.4 percent of the respondents indicated that their parents do not motivate them to study in comparison to only 35.6 percent who indicated that their parents do motivate them to study. Table 3 also shows that 77.7 percent of the respondents disagreed that their parents check their school work activities regularly. Only 22.2 percent of the respondents have parents who are able to check on their school work activities regularly. Furthermore, Table 3 indicates that the majority of the respondents (80%) are not assisted by their parents with regard to their homework activities. Only 20 percent of the respondents were being helped by their parents with homework activities. The results in Table 3 show that the Grade 8 and 9 learners do not have parental supervision to enable them to learn and study. These results would indicate that the learners are not being provided with parental supervision at all. One would like think that parents should be there for their children, motivating them to study very hard, checking their school work activities as well as helping them with homework activities. Ontario Capacity Building Series K-12 (2012) notes that parental involvement that is focused on student learning has the greatest impact on student achievement. Furthermore, parents who talk with their children about their day at school or who make sure there is a quiet place to do homework or who serve on school councils or volunteer on school trips show good examples of parental involvement in

Table 2: Study timeframe

	<i>I study on weekends</i>	<i>I study during the morning study time</i>	<i>I study during afternoon studies</i>
Strongly disagree	23 51.2%	16 35.6%	16 35.6%
Disagree	20 44.4%	23 51.1%	20 44.4%
Agree	1 2.2%	5 11.1%	8 17.8%
Strongly agree	1 2.2%	1 2.2%	1 2.2%

Table 2: Parental supervision while studying

	<i>My parents motivate me to study</i>	<i>My parents check my school work activities regularly</i>	<i>My parents always help me with my homework activities</i>
Strongly disagree	9 20%	11 24.4%	14 31.1%
Disagree	20 4.4%	24 53.3%	22 48.9%
Agree	12 26.7%	9 20%	8 17.8%
Strongly agree	4 8.9%	1 2.2%	1 2.2%

their children’s education. Education Scotland (2014) states that parents, carers and families are by far the most important influences in a child’s life and their support can play a vital role at all stages of education, as they make a difference in improving the achievement and behaviour of their children at school. Walker et al. (2004) state that parents can be involved in their children’s education through homework. Through homework activities that can be completed after school or during the school day at home, parents are afforded the chance to know what their children are learning at school.

Study Patterns of Grade 8 and 9 Learners

The results in Table 4a show that 51.1percent of the respondents indicated that they only study subjects that they like most. Forty-six percent of the respondents indicated that they disagree with the statement “I only study subjects that I like most”. However, the respondents indicated with 64.4percent that they do not only study subjects that are taught by their favourite teachers. The results in Table 4a may suggest that Grade 8 and 9 learners only study subjects that they like most and not only subjects that are taught by their favourite teachers. The majority of the respondents (91.1%) indicated that they do not like reading books. The results in Table 4a suggest that the study patterns adopted by Senior Phase level (Grade 8 and 9) learners might be the contributing factors to their dismal literacy proficiency performance in school. Learners should enjoy and like reading and

should study all the subjects that are taught in their grades for them to pass. According to Al Abyad (2014), one of the reasons why some learners hate studying is false beliefs about school and the subjects they study. To most learners, studying makes them feel controlled, which is something that they hate, as they like freedom to do what they want in their own time. Furthermore, Heick (2014) states that unlike media experiences, most students gravitate easily towards social networking sites such as Instagram, Facebook, Vine, Epic Fail, YouTube channels and video games. For the learners of this study, reading is not an enjoyable experience and it lacks the immediate spectacle that can catalyse the experience and keep them looking for more. This would explain the dismal literacy proficiency of the Senior Phase level (Grade 8 and 9) learners. Moreover, this in line with a study by Ebele and Olofu (2017) which find that there is significant relationship between study habits and students’ academic performance. The study recommended that teachers and school guidance counselors collaboratively guide students on how to develop good study habits; thereby enhancing their academic success (Ebele and Olofu 2017).

The results in Table 4b show that 51.1 percent of the respondents agreed that they only study what has been taught on the day as compared to 48.9 percent who indicated that they do not study what has been taught on the day. These results may indicate that Grade 8 and 9 learners only concentrate on what has been taught on the day when studying or they simply do not study

Table 4a: Study patterns

	<i>I only study subjects that I like most</i>	<i>I only study subjects taught by my favourite teachers</i>	<i>I enjoy reading my books</i>
Strongly disagree	6 13.3%	4 31.1%	10 22.2%
Disagree	16 35.5%	15 33.4%	27 60%
Agree	19 42.2%	14 31.1%	7 15.6%
Strongly agree	4 8.9%	2 4.4%	1 2.2%

Table 4b: Study patterns

	<i>I only study what is taught on the day</i>	<i>I only study when there is a test</i>	<i>I only study when there is an examination</i>
Strongly disagree	10 22.2%	3 6.7%	4 8.9%
Disagree	12 26.7%	5 11.1%	9 20%
Agree	20 44.4%	26 57.8%	19 42.2%
Strongly agree	3 6.7%	11 24.4%	13 28.9%

at all what has been taught on the day. Table 4b shows that the majority of the respondents (82.2%) agreed that they only study when there is a test, with 71.1percent stating that they only study when there is an examination. The results in Table 4b indicate that when there are no tests or examinations, the Senior Phase level (Grade 8 and 9) learners may not study at all. These results show the study patterns that are being followed by learners when studying and may have serious implications for their literacy proficiency performance. Kurtus (2012) states that one of the biggest reasons learners fail is procrastination and putting off tasks. Even though the Grattan Institute Report fall short on explaining the reasons why students were disengaged on school activities, it suggested that much of the causes are around subject matter that is too hard or too easy and perhaps poor-quality teaching (Goss et al. 2017). Not being good at taking tests is another significant factor in terms of getting poor grades. This is hugely attributed to by the fact that learners do not study or do their homework in time or only study when there is a test or an examination.

Study Habits of Grade 8 and 9 Learners

The results in Table 5 show that the majority of the respondents (86.7%) indicated that they disagreed that they make notes while studying, and 60 percent stated that they study while listening to music. Table 5 also shows that the majority of the respondents do not like chatting on the phone while studying. These results indicate that even though Grade 8 and 9 learners

do not like chatting on the phone while studying, which may be attributed to the fact that they do not have cell phones, they do not make notes and rather listen to music while studying. Looking at the results in Table 5, one would say that the habit of listening to music while studying could be something that is distracting learners from concentrating. One way of keeping such learners concentrated while studying would be to encourage them to make notes of what they are doing rather than just looking at the text in the books. Taking notes while studying helps when preparing for a test or an examination, and allows a person to put concepts in his or her own terms, making it easier to understand (Howtostudy.com 2013). Landau (2010) states that students or learners perform worst while listening to music, regardless of whether they like the music or not, and tend to do better when studying in silence. Furthermore, music may impair cognitive abilities, especially when a person is trying to memorise things in order, as the changing words and notes in the music may be distracting (Landau 2010).

Hindrances to Studying

Table 6 shows that all the respondents (100%) indicated that they find it difficult to study as they do not understand English. Another factor hindering the Senior Phase level (Grade 8 and 9) learners from studying is the fact that they like watching television more than studying (75.6%). Furthermore, 88.9 percent of the respondents indicated that they like playing

Table 5: Study habits of Grade 8 and 9 learners

	<i>I make notes while studying</i>	<i>I like to study while chatting on my phone</i>	<i>I study while listening to music</i>
Strongly disagree	12 26.7%	11 24.4%	9 20%
Disagree	27 60%	17 37.8%	9 20%
Agree	5 11.1%	12 26.7%	20 44.4%
Strongly agree	1 2.2%	5 11.1%	7 15.6%

Table 6: Hindrances to studying

	<i>I find it difficult to study as I do not understand English</i>	<i>I like to watch television more than studying</i>	<i>I like playing more than studying</i>
Strongly disagree	-	5 11.1%	1 2.2%
Disagree	-	6 13.3%	4 8.9%
Agree	20 44.4%	25 55.6%	28 62.2%
Strongly agree	25 55.6%	9 20.0%	12 26.7%

more than studying. These results indicate that some of the factors that are affecting the Grade 8 and 9 learners when studying is the fact that they find it difficult to study, as they do not understand English and they like watching television and playing more than studying. Normazidah et al. (2012) and Souriyavongsa et al. (2013) note that some of the factors that cause learners to perform poorly in English language learning is that English is regarded as a difficult subject to learn; learners lack support to use English in the home environment and the community; there is insufficient or no exposure to the language, as there are limited opportunities to use English outside the classrooms; a limitation of vocabulary proficiency; and English reading materials are not always available.

According to Gautango (2007), even though almost all the subjects in school, except Home Language, demand learners' ability to read, such prerequisite is not a norm in all public schools in South Africa. Subjects such as Mathematics and Science are taught in English from about age 10 and many teachers do not have the English language skills to teach such subjects effectively (Voice of America 2012). Learners are not being prepared to succeed in reading and are only introduced to English when they are in Grade 4 as per language policy (Voice of America 2012). In South Africa, an average Grade 2 learner in South Africa is unable to name the letters or their sounds, while most of the Grade 3 learners are unable to read English at a Grade 1 level (Gautango 2007). Other than the English language problem, Thomas (2011) states that nowadays youngsters are spending an average of two hours 40 minutes in front of the television every day, instead of studying. The negative impacts of spending more time watching television include poorer school performance and decreased scores on tests and examinations (Borzekowski and Robinson 2005; Johnson et al. 2007; Barr-Anderson et al. 2008). One of the main concerns about watching television for an extended time is that it causes learners to go to bed later at night and wake up very tired, to the extent that they cannot pay attention at school and resulting in difficulties to concentrate, being lethargic and laziness to do class activities (Borzekowski and Robinson 2005; Johnson et al. 2007; Barr-Anderson et al. 2008).

In their study on "Repeated retention or dropout? Disputing Hobson's choice in South Afri-

can township schools", Grossen, Grobler and Lacante (2017) emphasise the need for provision of career guidance counselling for learners in the form of academic, technical and vocational schooling to enhance their performance and improve the learning outcomes. This would mean that teachers should only teach their subject content but should also provide guidance on career availabilities and choices. This will ensure that learners who are not necessarily interested in studying hard will also be motivated to start doing so.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this paper was to determine the cause of the dismal literacy proficiency performance in the Senior Phase level (Grade 8 and 9) in South Africa. What can be concluded here is that these learners might be studying, but they are adopting unproductive study habits and patterns. The findings of the study reveal that some of the learners are not being motivated by their parents to study and that parents are unable to check on their school work activities regularly. Learners seldom receive assistance from their parents with regard to their homework activities. The study found that learners do not like reading books and only study what has been taught on the day and when there is a test or an examination. Furthermore, the study found that the Senior Phase level (Grade 8 and 9) learners do not make notes while studying and that they study while listening to music. The study highlighted some of the factors that undermine any motivation for studying, which included that the Senior Phase level (Grade 8 and 9) learners find it difficult to study as they do not understand English and the fact that they like playing and watching television more than studying. The study concludes that the study habits and patterns of Grade 8 and 9 learners are not effective to enable them to do well in schools and explain their dismal literacy proficiency performance in schools today.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Senior Phase level (Grade 8 and 9) learners should be offered constant motivation about the importance of study and must be reminded of their responsibilities towards their studies. Educators should mentor learners who do not have

parents or whose parents work far away from home, and should act as role models or guardians to such learners. Learners should be introduced to the language of learning and teaching, especially English First Additional Language, at an early age to ensure that they do not encounter a language barrier as they progress in school. The study also recommends that learners should be assisted with adopting study skills and strategies that can benefit them while studying. Educators should provide enough reading materials such as newspapers, magazines, books and comics to learners in order to instil love of reading among learners. Parental supervision should be provided to learners on how they balance time for playing or watching television and studying. A broad-based study should be conducted in all the provinces of South Africa to substantiate the findings of this study.

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