

The Impact of Socio-economic Factors on the Performance of Selected High School Learners in the Western Cape Province, South Africa

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KEYWORDS Economics of Education. Educational Reform. National Senior Certificate Examinations. Underperforming Schools. Gender Equity, Poverty and Inequality

ABSTRACT The quality education has been considered as a cornerstone of economic development and social transformation. It is therefore, educational quality and its development have been regarded as indispensable for the teaching and learning process. The World Economic Forum in April 2013 ranked South Africa as second from last in the world for math and science education, just ahead of Yemen. South Africa's schools fare poorly in international comparison, even among African countries. This research paper addresses some of the Socio-economic factors that contribute for the underperformance of learners in secondary schools in the Western Cape province of South Africa. By definition, schools are categorised as underperforming if they do not obtain a pass rate of at least 60% in the National Senior Certificate Examinations. The underperforming schools are mainly located in the townships schools and schools in informal settlements with peculiar contexts. An attempt is made in this paper to delve the socioeconomic circumstances of learners' attending underperforming schools in the Western Cape Province and show that learners at these schools face a number of socioeconomic challenges which limits their ability to achieve.

INTRODUCTION

Concerns are expressed by many at the state of education in South Africa. These concerns have increased since the establishment of democracy in 1994 when the ANC was the dominant party in the government of national unity. The ANC made a commitment in terms of housing, education and health, these areas were targeted specifically to redress the legacy of apartheid.

The strong legacy of apartheid and the consequent correlation between education and wealth have meant that, generally speaking, poorer students perform worse academically.

Unfortunately little has changed for the last two decades of democracy. It is to note that the links between affluence and educational quality can partially explain this outcome since

the poor receive a far inferior quality of education when compared to their wealthier counterparts (as quoted by Spaul 2011:1).

It is therefore necessary to improve the quality of education provided to the poor. While it is easy to understand why the affluent schools outnumber the affluent schools, outperform poor schools, it is less clear why certain poor schools succeed where other, equally poor schools, fail. Is this difference due to variations in school management socio-economic status, and the provision of textbooks? Or perhaps differences in teacher quality, parental education, and preschool education? While not without its own problems, quantitative analysis is more able to identify these factors, and in addition, to the quantify the size of their impact (Spaul 2011:1; Naidoo et al. 2014). Further, the quality education is considered to be a corner stone of economic development and social transformation. Educational quality and its development are therefore regarded as indispensable for the teaching and learning process (Rena 2008). It has become an established fact that South Africa's schools fare poorly in international comparison, even among African countries. Among 12 African countries participating in the Major Lindsey and Africa (MLA) study in

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1999, South African Grade 4 learners scored lowest in numeracy and fourth lowest in literacy. The vast majority of children attending disadvantaged schools do not acquire a basic level of mastery in reading, writing and mathematics. In its global rankings, the World Economic Forum (2013) recently ranked South Africa second last in the world for math and science education, just ahead of Yemen.

The government of South Africa has acknowledged that “the quality of school education for black people is poor” across the country. Van der Berg (2008: 2; cf. Bloch 2009) found that “educational quality in historically black schools - which constitute 80% of enrolment and are thus central to educational progress - has not improved significantly since political transition.” Educators, principals, school management teams and school governing bodies in South Africa repeatedly stressed the view that primary schools are continuously failing to lay a solid educational foundation, especially with regard to numeracy and literacy. Experts often say that the government of South Africa has to overcome years of underinvestment in black education under Apartheid. With the aim of promoting learner achievement, the Government of South Africa embarked on many educational reform changes. These reforms have met with limited success.

Prior to the South Africa’s first democratic government in 1994, school improvement in the country was dominated by NGO projects, generally small in scale and focusing largely on teacher development. Since 1994, the field of school improvement and effectiveness has become pluralized, with government entering the fray, and the introduction of a variety of programmes, including systemic and standards-based approaches (Taylor 2007).

Learners are often hungry and ill; do not have proper clothing; lack study facilities, parental support, study motivation, self-esteem and language proficiency; and move frequently from school to school. According to the Department of Basic Education Report, over two million learners were single or double orphans¹ in 2008 and nearly 50,000 learners were reported pregnant by their school principals, of which approximately 70% were in Grade 9 or below (Department of Basic Education 2010). While learner performance is an important indicator of school quality, others should also be considered, such as

management or infrastructure. Gallie assessed (2007: 18) the “quality of organizational capacity available to perform effective change management functions” and classified schools into high-functioning, low-functioning, and non-functioning institutions. His study implies that most schools in South Africa are either low or non-functioning. In terms of schools’ infrastructure, the National Educational Infrastructure Management Systems (NEIMS 2009) reported that 3,600 public schools have no electricity, 2,444 have no water supply, 11,231 use pit-latrines toilets, only 21% have a library, and 23% have a computing facility. The Department of Basic Education reported that 6,619 schools had multi-grade classes in 2009 and 1,209 schools had an average class size of over 60 in 2008 (Department of Basic Education 2010). Unsurprisingly, the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation finds that “close to 80% of South Africa’s schools are essentially dysfunctional” (Taylor 2006: 65).

Low or non-functioning schools are suffering from various factors which include but not limited to poor management and leadership within the school systems in the Western Cape. The socio-economic backgrounds of the students and parents also contribute significantly to this underperformance. An attempt is made in this paper to explore various factors that contribute in for underperforming schools in Western Cape Province.

The study attempts to answer the following questions:

- How are the socio-economic factors that affect performance of high school in Western Cape Province?
- To what extent the safety and security influence the performance of high school learners in the Western Cape Province?
- To what extent the neighbourhood and housing impacted the performance of high school learners in the Western Cape Province?

This research paper addresses some of the key socio-economic factors that contribute to the underperformance of selected secondary schools in the Western Cape province of South Africa. By definition, schools are categorized as underperforming if they do not obtain a pass rate of at least 60% in the National Senior Certificate examinations. Underperforming schools are mainly townships schools with peculiar contexts.

Objectives

- To investigate the nature and causes of underperformance of high school learners in the Western Cape Province; and
- To analyse how the socio-economic factors impacted the performance of learners in the Western Cape Province.

Literature Review

This sub-section provides the theoretical framework in which this study is located. It begins with a brief discussion highlighting the distinctions between the issues in economics of education and socio-economic factors that affect educational quality. This summarises some of the pertinent studies that were undertaken to address the topic under discussion. The many and varied links between student socio-economic status and educational outcomes have been well documented in the South African economics of education literature.

Poor educational outcomes at the school level are a result of a series of complex and interrelated factors, both within and outside the school system. The paper focuses specifically on the socio-economic circumstances of learners attending underperforming schools.

Thomas and Stockton (2003: 1) discuss the impact of socio-economic status, ethnic and gender on student achievement. The authors argue that since Coleman's (1966) assertion of the significant influence of student background on school activities, socio-economic status is seen as a strong predictor of student achievement. Payne and Biddle (1999 as cited in Thomas and Stockton 2003: 2) commented in their study of data obtained from the Second International Mathematics Study (SIMS) that if the USA scores had been represented only by its school districts with low-level poverty, the USA would have ranked second out of the 23 participating nations, but if only its school districts with high-poverty were considered, it would have ranked above Nigeria and Swaziland.

Poverty interfaces with other factors like ethnic and ethnicity as a strong predictor of educational attainment. Harkreader and Weathersby (1998) found the influence of ethnic and ethnicity to be a less than economic factors. On the contrary, Bankston and Caldas (1998 as cited in Thomas and Stockton 2003) concluded that mi-

nority status was more highly related to achievement than to socio-economic status. For example although black children are more likely to live in poverty than white children, their ethnic minority status is more likely to be correlated with lower teacher qualifications such as certification and years of experience (Darling-Hammond 1999 as cited in Thomas and Stockton 2003). Ethnic cultural influences are important and may also combine with gender effects to predict achievement. Lee and Madyun (2009) state that individuals growing up in disadvantaged neighbourhoods are more susceptible to pervasive, self-replicating underdevelopment than their peers growing up in socially and economically stable neighbourhoods as a direct consequence of larger social factors far beyond the influence of individuals. Several distinctive neighbourhood characteristics influence neighbourhood disadvantage and thus a community's ability to maintain social control. These include variables such as family composition, high residential mobility, ethnic diversity, neighbourhood poverty and crime. The socio-economic status is correlated with a students' cognitive ability and achievements (determined in this case by IQ scores) since children coming from families who have a high socio-economic status tend to socialise their children in a way that betters their performance in IQ tests which also informs the way they perform academically (Lee and Madyun 2009).

Lee and Madyun (2009: 159) established that students living in neighbourhoods with low crime and low poverty showed higher achievement in both mathematics and reading than students in other types of neighbourhoods. Conversely, students living in neighbourhoods with high crime and high poverty lagged behind these two subjects when compared with their peers in other neighbourhoods. They also found a significant interaction effect between neighbourhood type and ethnic on achievement. These results suggest that the school performance of blacks and whites was affected differently based on neighbourhood type.

Some researchers have argued for some unique neighbourhood mechanisms that positively contribute to individual outcomes within black neighbourhoods. According to Wheaton (1985), the presence of neighbourhood disadvantage may paradoxically encourage individuals to organise or mobilise socio-economic re-

sources to deal with their social marginalisation (as cited in Schieman 2005). This perspective provides one likely explanation for why some blacks sometimes excel in spite of marginalised neighbourhood conditions. Although research strongly points to the importance of school quality, the argument here is that improving schools alone is far from enough when larger social structures are so disadvantaged.

The South African literature on economics of education reflects the above expectations, but it fails to provide a model to explain the set of intricately linked underperforming high schools particularly in the context of Western Cape (WC). An attempt is made in this section to review of the pertinent studies.

Apart from the occasional and brief description of a situational context, there are only a few studies investigating the case of underperforming high schools in the Western Cape especially in underperforming township or informal settlement schools. Instead, the literature is largely imbued with normative, summative, anecdotal, or case-specific propositions. One of the exceptions is a study by van der Westhuizen et al. (2005), who identified 22 organisational culture factors in relation to academic achievement in schools, thus linking organisational culture to academic performance.

According to Van der Berg (2008), curriculum coverage and the frequency of mathematics and literacy exercises are extremely low and strongly associated with poor performance. Other causes are that “the difficulty level of what is covered in class (some of which is rooted in weak teacher subject knowledge) is simply too low, the pace too slow, there are too many interruptions—and most principals are not really interested enough about how much teaching and learning is really happening in classrooms”.

Further, Van der Berg vouched that parents can also play a crucial role in taking a stand against inferior education, but many do not know what they should be expecting of their schools. He further stated that “only when parents have a better understanding of the quality of education that their children receive. The quality education empowers our communities. As a nation, we cannot continue with a situation where only one-tenth of South African schools really provide acceptable quality education. He therefore lamented that “Our children deserve better.”

According to Spaul (2011) the factors which contribute significantly to student performance are homework frequency, preschool education, and the availability of reading textbooks. In contrast, teacher-subject knowledge was found to have only a modest impact on Grade 6 student performance. Decomposing student performance by socio-economic status shows that 17 years on from apartheid, South Africa’s education system is still a tale of two schools (Spaul 2011).

The reading and maths distributions show that students from the upper most quintile of Socio-Economic Status (SES) far outperform students from the lower four quintiles. When decomposed by quintile, the distribution is bimodal by top quintile and bottom four quintiles, suggesting that the data generating processes at work. It would seem that student performance does not improve evenly across the various SES quintiles (Spaul 2011: 7).

Further in another recent study Spaul (2013) used spatial analysis techniques with an understanding that the local analysis can be performed to address the problem of reporting averages within South African education, thereby “overestimating the educational achievement of students” (Spaul 2013: 436). In addition, the method of assigning pass rates to sub-places as well as the measurement of proximity not only in regard to physical distance but using contextual similarity should be investigated (Naidoo et al. 2014).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND DATA SOURCE

This paper is based on the research methodology consisted of both quantitative and qualitative approaches (included a combination of field work, interviews, literature and document reviews and desktop analysis). The unit of analysis was done in underperforming secondary schools in the Western Cape. The sampling frame consisted of underperforming secondary schools based on the 2009 final national Grade 12 examinations and consisted of 22 (out of 78) secondary schools for which detailed data was available at the time of finalising the sampling frame and sample population. All questionnaires were checked for correct completion by the research team before learners left the group. Data was then captured in Statistical Package for the

Social Sciences (SPSS) then data analysis commenced. The fieldwork was conducted during February and March 2011.

Inferential statistics were used to draw inferences about a population from a sample. Indeed the goal of statistical analysis is to answer 2 questions: 1) Is there a significant effect/association/difference between the variables of interest, that is, socio-economic background and the performance of high school learners? 2) The research also looked at if there is an effect/association/difference – how big is it? The study used mean, median, mode and standard deviation techniques. Standard deviation is a measure of the spread or dispersion of a set of data given in the same units as the indicator. It indicates the typical distance between the scores of a distribution and the mean. Further, it implies that the higher the standard deviation, the greater the spread of data.

The sampling frame consisted of all confirmed 22 schools from which 14 schools were purposefully selected to ensure representation for both ethnic and location (urban/rural) variables. For the purpose of this study, rural schools were defined as all schools outside the Cape metropolitan area (Metro). Of the schools constituting the sampling frame (N=22), 15 were from within (urban) and seven from outside the Cape Metro (rural). Of the 15 urban schools, four were classified as historically Coloured schools and eleven as historically African schools. Of the remaining seven rural schools, six were classified as historically African and one as a historically Coloured school. The remaining seven schools, not included in the sample were listed as replacements in the case of refusals.

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

settle with the completion of only 12 schools, instead of the intended 14.

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

Three survey instruments (questionnaires) were developed: one for completion by the principals; one for educators; and one for learners. Questionnaires were developed to measure a range of aspects shown by literature to impact on the functionality of a school and thus the academic performance of its learners. Table 1 provides a broader account of the type of questions included in the questionnaires by indicating categories of questions for each respondent group.

Table 1: Questionnaire categories as for each respondent group

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

Educators were randomly selected from staff lists provided by the school, with two educators selected for each grade offered by the school. Learners were randomly selected from class lists provided by the school with eight learners selected from each grade. The total numbers of questionnaires completed were: 11 principal questionnaires, 84 teacher questionnaires and 436 learner questionnaires. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the School

Management Teams (SMTs) of each school and focus group discussions were held with available members of the School Governing Bodies (SGBs) of the selected schools. These interviews were then transcribed and analysed.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this section of the paper the researchers present and discuss the results emanating from the analysis of questionnaires administered to learners of schools included in the study. It offers a description of the socio-economic context of learners followed by a summary of the key findings in the context of the educational attainment of learners. In conclusion, a number of key recommendations are made based on the findings of the overall study.

Gender Equity

The underperforming schools that were selected had a higher concentration of African than Coloured learners. Approximately 66% of learners classified themselves as local Africans compared to 30% Coloured and 4% foreign Africans. From the schools included in this study, Africans seem overrepresented at underperforming schools in the Western Cape, considering this population group constitutes only 30% of the total population in the province (StatsSA, Community Survey 2007).

Table 2 presents the ethnic group composition of high school learners at underperforming schools, when comparing the ethnic composition of the underperforming schools in terms of an urban and rural divide; the data shows African learners as the majority learner group. The analysis shows that 77% of learners from the rural schools included in the study classified themselves as local African, 21% as Coloured

and nearly 2% as foreign African. As can be seen from Table 3, this trend in ethnic composition was repeated for urban schools included in the study, with 56.8% classifying themselves as local African, 37% as Coloured and 6% as foreign African. Important to note is the larger percentage of foreign Africans going to urban schools versus rural schools, revealing a preference for urban destinations among foreign migrants.

Table 2: Ethnic of learners at underperforming schools²

	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>	<i>Cumulative percent</i>
African local	286	65.6	65.6
African foreign	19	4.4	70.0
Coloured	130	29.8	99.8
Asian	1	.2	100.0
Total	436	100.0	

Source: Primary data

In terms of the gender divide of learners attending underperforming schools, the data presented in Table 4 shows that there is a dominance of female learners with 60.6%. Analysing the gender distribution of the learners in terms of their ethnic composition shows a greater percentage of female students for all ethnic groups. The majority of male students classified themselves as local African. However, the relation-

Table 4: Gender distribution of learners

	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>	<i>Cumulative percentage</i>
Male	172	39.4	39.4
Female	264	60.6	100.0
Total	436	100.0	

Source: Primary data

Table 3: Ethnicity of a learner and urban/rural divide

<i>Ethnic of learner</i>	<i>Area of school in terms of urban/rural divide</i>					
	<i>Urban</i>		<i>Rural</i>		<i>Total</i>	
	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
African local	142	56.8	144	77.4	286	65.6
African foreign	16	6.4	3	1.6	19	4.4
Coloured	92	36.8	39	21.0	131	30
Total	250	100	186	100	436	100

Source: Primary data

ship between these variables (gender and ethnic) was shown as statistically not significant.

Socio-economic Factors

As the Table 5 interestingly implies that the percentage of female students from other African countries (68.4%) outnumbered the local African learners (58.0%). The socio-economic variables describe the social and economic environment of learners at underperforming schools. The paper discusses variables related to the household, for example, household structure, physical infrastructure, level of parental involvement and other factors that give insight into the home environment and household characteristics of learners. The second session describes general neighbourhood conditions by examining issues related to poverty and other forms of material deprivation, safety and security, etc.

Household Level Factors

The home environment is defined as both the physical environment and the composition of households, since these factors all impact on the ability of learners to function adequately at school. As Table 6 explains that there was a large variation in access to housing for the different population groups, only 81% of learners live in a brick home compared to the provincial average of 84%. Another 18% lived in informal dwellings such as shacks (that is, iron and wooden dwellings) compared to 14% for the province (Community Survey 2007, Stats SA). When analysing access to housing in terms of ethnic group, the data shows foreign African learners with the highest percentage of access to brick dwellings

(89%), followed by Coloured learners (86%) and then local African learners (78%). Compared to learners from the other two population groups, local Africans were also in the worst position regarding access to flush toilets (inside the house) at only 59%, compared to 84% and 87% of foreign African and Coloured learners respectively. Regarding piped water, 91% of African learners indicated they had access, compared to 95% and 99% of foreign African and Coloured learners respectively.

Access to electricity is another basic service necessary to ensure a decent level of living. Apart from being an important source of energy for cooking, lighting and heating, it also enables the household to connect to the world via radio, television and Internet. The researchers' results show an overall high-level of access to electricity (98%), with local Africans showing a slightly lower access at 97%.

Although learners in general show high levels of access to acceptable housing and basic services, it is important to note the disadvantage of local African learners, consistently showing less access. This is significant in that the majority of learners attending underperforming schools are also found to be local African learners. This is important as the lack of basic services has been shown to reinforce the vicious cycle of disease, poverty and unemployment (Van der Berg 2008).

Inadequate access to basic services and housing directly impacts on hygiene levels and the overall health status of a household in general, and children in particular. The more frequently learners are ill, the more they are absent from school. This results in them falling further and further behind in their schoolwork, with disastrous consequences for learner attainment.

Table 5: Ethnicity and gender of the learner

<i>Ethnic of learner</i>	<i>Gender of learners</i>					
	<i>Urban</i>		<i>Rural</i>		<i>Total</i>	
	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
African local	120	42.0	166	58.0	286	100
African foreign	6	31.6	13	68.4	19	100
Coloured	46	35.1	85	64.9	131	100
Total	172	39.4	264	60.6	436	100

Source: Primary data

Table 6: Access to housing and basic services by ethnicity

	<i>African local</i>		<i>African foreign</i>		<i>Coloured</i>		<i>Total</i>	
	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
<i>Type of House You Live in</i>								
Brick house	223	77.7	17	89.5	112	86.2	352	80.7
Wooden house	14	4.9	1	5.3	13	10.0	28	6.4
Informal house/shack	44	15.3	1	5.3	5	3.8	50	11.5
Container	2	0.7	0	0.0	0	0.0	2	0.5
Flat	4	1.4	0	0.0	0	0.0	4	0.9
Total	287	100	19	100	130	100	436	100
<i>Main Source of Water</i>								
Inside tap	185	64.8	17	89.5	122	93.1	324	74.3
Outside tap	74	25.8	1	5.3	8	6.2	83	19.0
Communal tap	26	9.1	0	0.0	1	0.8	27	6.2
Other water source	0	0.0	1	5.3	0	0.0	1	0.2
No access to piped water	1	.3%	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	0.2
Total	286	100	19	100	131	100	436	100
<i>Type of Toilet Facility</i>								
Flush toilet inside the house	170	59.2	16	84.2	113	86.9	299	68.6
Flush toilet outside	69	24.0	2	10.5	5	3.8	76	17.4
Other toilet inside	16	5.9	1	5.3	6	3.8	23	5.3
Other toilet outside	25	8.7	0	0.0	6	4.6	31	7.1
No access to a toilet	6	2.1	0	0.0	1	0.8	7	1.6
Total	286	100	19	100	131	100	436	100
<i>Access to Electricity</i>								
Yes	276	96.5	19	100	130	99.2	425	97.5
No	10	3.5	0	0.0	1	0.8	11	2.5
Total	286	100	19	100	131	100	436	100

Source: Primary data

In addition to the physical home environment, learners were also asked to answer questions on their household characteristics, providing some insights into their household dynamics. These included questions assessing their household composition, their primary caregivers and primary breadwinners, the highest level of education of the head of the household, etc. In an effort to ascertain the level of domestic support available to learners, questions were also included to measure the support learners receive from their parents. The educational benefit for learners whose parents or guardians show sustained interest and support by way of being involved in the education and schooling of their children is well established.

An analysis of the primary caregivers revealed significant differences between the caregivers of learners for the different ethnic groups. On average, local African learners are shown in Table 7 as least likely to live with both their biological parents (27.3%) compared to 71% of foreign Africans and 45% of Coloured learners. The majority of local Africans live with only their

mother (36%) compared to 26% of Coloured and 7% of foreign African learners.

Overall, the majority (79%) of learners indicated that a biological parent or foster parent was the primary caregiver in the household. The data in Table 8 shows that Coloured learners had the highest proportion (83.7%) of biological or foster parents as the primary breadwinners of their households, followed by local African learners (78%).

The data presented in Table 9 shows that the primary breadwinner of the vast majority of learners did complete basic schooling. It is to note that 39.9% indicating they had completed some secondary schooling, another 24% had completed their secondary schooling, and 12% had completed some post-matric qualification. A disconcerting finding is that nearly 10% of learners are socialised in households where the primary breadwinner is illiterate, that is, had no schooling.

In terms of ethnic, breadwinners in the households of foreign African learners have the highest educational level with the majority (37%)

Table 7: Caregivers frequencies by ethnic group

Description of care givers by ethnic group	Responses	N	Percent	Percent of cases
African Local	Both biological parents	70	27.3%	27.6%
	Mother only in HH	91	35.5%	35.8%
	Father only in HH	11	4.3%	4.3%
	Siblings only HH	14	5.5%	5.5%
	Grandparent/s only in HH	9	3.5%	3.5%
	Step parent only in HH	4	1.6%	1.6%
	Foster parent/s only in HH	6	2.3%	2.4%
	Father and a step parent	6	2.3%	2.4%
	Mother and a step parent	22	8.6%	8.7%
	Learners without adults in the HH	23	9.0%	9.1%
Total	256	100.0%	100.9%	
African Foreign	Both biological parents	10	71.4%	71.4%
	Mother only in HH	1	7.1%	7.1%
	Father and a step parent	2	14.3%	14.3%
	Mother and a step parent	1	7.1%	7.1%
	Total	14	100.0%	100.0%
Coloured	Both biological parents	53	44.5%	44.5%
	Mother only in HH	31	26.1%	26.1%
	Father only in HH	9	7.6%	7.6%
	Siblings only HH	1	.8%	.8%
	Grandparent/s only in HH	10	8.4%	8.4%
	Foster parent/s only in HH	2	1.7%	1.7%
	Father and a step parent	5	4.2%	4.2%
	Mother and a step parent	8	6.7%	6.7%
	Total	119	100.0%	100.0%

Source: Primary data

Table 8: Primary breadwinner³ in learner household by ethnic

Primary breadwinner	African local		African foreign		Coloured		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
You yourself	4	1.6	0	0.0	1	0.8	5	1.3
Biological parent/ foster parent/ guardian	194	78.0	12	63	109	83.7	315	79.1
Other adult family member that is not your brother or sister (26yrs +)	23	9.2	1	5.3	15	11.6	39	9.8
Other adult that is a non-family member (26yrs +)	3	1.2	0	0.0	1		4	1.0
A brother or sister that is between the ages 15 – 25 yrs	5	2.0	1	5.3	4	0.8	10	2.5
A brother or sister that is 26 yrs or older	20	8.0	6	26	0	3.1	25	6.3
Total	249	100	19	100	130	100	398	100

Source: Primary data

having a post-matric qualification, compared to 13% of local African learners and a very low 5% for Coloured learners. Slightly more breadwinners of local African (25%) households had completed their secondary school education than those of Coloured learner households (23%).The

breadwinners in the households of Coloured learners had the lowest educational level with the majority (50%) having only had some secondary schooling.

These findings are important within the context of this study because the educational level

Table 9: Highest educational level of the primary breadwinner in your household by ethnicity

Educational level of primary breadwinner	Ethnic of learners African local		African foreign		Coloured		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
No education	18	6.3	6	31.6	7	5.3	31	7.1
Some primary schooling	28	9.8	0	0	10	7.6	38	8.7
Completed primary schooling	25	8.7	0	0	12	9.2	37	8.5
Some secondary schooling	106	37.1	2	10.5	66	50.4	174	39.9
Completed secondary school	71	24.8	4	21.1	30	22.9	105	24.1
Post-matric qualification	38	13.3	7	36.8	6	4.6	51	11.7
Total	286	100	19	100	131	100	436	100

Source: Primary data

of the primary breadwinner in the learner household can be seen as an indicator of the ability of the primary breadwinner to render academic support to a learner. Not only does the educational level of the primary breadwinner directly impact on the employment opportunities available (and is thus a determinant of the household income level), it also highlights the resources available to learners. The highest educational level of the primary breadwinner in the households according to their ethnicity, from these statistics, it is clear that the vast majority of learners in underperforming schools are not able to depend on their parents to assist with homework, which is particularly significant for Grade 11 and Grade 12 learners.

One of the strongest themes to emerge from this research into the possible causes for underperformance among learners concerns the lack of parental involvement and interest in their children – both in their general wellbeing and particularly in their school work. There was consensus amongst School Governing Bodies (SGBs), principals, School Management Teams (SMTs) and teachers in this regard. This issue was also tested with learners of which the findings are presented below.

The first issue explored concerned the issue of good and effective parenting. Learners had to indicate to what extent their life was negatively impacted by a lack of involvement and interest in them as individuals and in their life generally. In asking learners if they were affected by a lack of parental involvement in aspects of their lives, just more than half (55%) answered in the negative; 30% indicated that they were somewhat effected with another 16% indicating this lack of involvement to have a “big effect”. If these responses are analysed in terms of loca-

tion, gender and ethnic, an interesting picture emerges: it would seem that urban and female learners are more likely to experience an impact from uninvolved parents with a significantly higher percentage of local African learners compared to Coloured learners indicating they were affected by this.

The study also explored the household size of learners. Household size, that is the number of household members sharing a living space, is widely accepted by demographers and sociologists as an indicator of living conditions. Living under conditions of overcrowding can impact negatively on the ability of learners to study. It can also expose children to adult sexual practices and make them vulnerable to sexual abuse (Hall and Posel 2012; Naidoo et al. 2014).

National statistics show a gradual decrease in household size from 4.5 in 1996 to approximately 4 in 2008. This trend towards smaller households is possibly a result of the state provision of subsidy houses and the manner in which housing allocations are done. It has however, also been established that households with children are much larger than the national average. The median household size of adult-only households is 2.7, while the median for household with children is 6.5 members (Hall and Posel 2012).

Although there is no standard measure of overcrowding in South Africa, many international definitions exist. The definition used here is derived from the UN-HABITAT definition, which is a maximum of two people per habitable room. ‘Habitable’ rooms exclude bathrooms and toilets. By using this definition, overcrowding is established by dividing the number of household members by the number of habitable rooms (Hall and Posel 2012). Thus, when taking the

average figures for all learners surveyed in this study, the majority learners (50%) live in a two-bedroom house. This is true for all three ethnic groups defined here. With an average household size of 5.6, this translates to an average of 2.8 persons per room. Another 27% indicated they lived in a one-bedroom house, translating to a mean value of 5.6 persons per room presented in Table 10. From this it is clear that the majority of learners have to cope with overcrowded conditions in their home environment and having to share sleeping space not only with siblings, but also with adults.

Table 10: Number of people sharing your house, including yourself (ethnic of learner)

<i>Ethnic of learner</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Std. deviation</i>
African local	5.53	286	2.236
African foreign	5.21	19	1.316
Coloured	5.95	131	2.261
Total	5.64	436	2.218

Source: Primary data

The issue of overcrowding is important as it has a direct impact on children living in these conditions since it has the potential to undermine the child's needs and rights. For example, studying and doing homework when other household members want to sleep, visit, and converse or watch television is very difficult. Children's right to privacy is compromised if they are not able to wash or change in private, and their right to a healthy environment is undermined as communicable diseases spread more easily in overcrowded conditions. As mentioned earlier, overcrowding also puts children at greater risk of sexual abuse, especially where boys and girls have to share beds, or children have to sleep with adults (Hall and Posel 2012).

Neighbourhood Factors

The overwhelming majority of learners attending underperforming schools grow up in poor communities, typically characterised by endless rows of small, high density sub-economic houses, large numbers of informal dwellings (shacks), and lack of services, economic hubs and sports facilities. These urban and rural townships look disorganised, unattractive and uninviting, with narrow rubbish-strewn streets and discarded items.

The research probed the possible impact of a range of negative social issues on learners' ability to perform optimally at school, as experienced and perceived by the learners themselves. The aspects affecting the greatest majority of learners were those relating to safety, with 43% stating they were greatly affected by violence and crime and 42% identifying gangsterism as having a profound impact on their lives. A substantial 40% of learners indicated they were greatly affected by poverty and unemployment.

It is important to note from the responses of urban and rural learners that urban learners were more affected by gangsterism (77%) and violence (67%) compared to rural learners. The negative influence and impact of violence and crime, peer pressure, substance abuse, HIV/AIDS, sexual abuse and teenage pregnancy was significantly higher amongst urban learners. In addition, substantially higher percentages of learners attending urban schools indicated that issues relating to poverty, unemployment and incidence of domestic violence affected their lives negatively. The considerable differences in the responses of urban and rural learners are somewhat unexpected, as the unemployment rate together with the rate and severity of poverty is higher in rural areas when compared to urban areas (Tlad 2006). Usually the argument would then follow that rural areas should present a higher prevalence and incidence of socio-economic problems and deviant behaviour. However, the data reflecting the perspective of the learners themselves provides us with a different picture. It could be that the negative impact of poverty is countered in the rural areas by a higher level of social and community cohesion, as well as an expectation of a generally higher level of normative behaviour within rural communities.

It is known that females are more affected by unfavourable neighbourhood conditions due to their greater vulnerability. It would therefore follow that they would experience a stronger sense of lack of safety as a result of crime, violence, sexual abuse, teenage pregnancy, HIV/AIDS and domestic violence (Wallace and May 2005).

As Table 11 explains that those learners indicating that social aspects had a "big effect" were analysed in terms of ethnicity, the data showed local African learners as substantially more affected than Coloured and foreign African learners. This was true for all variables tested, but especially pronounced in aspects relat-

Table 11: Learners indicating social aspects to have a big effect on their lives: Distribution of responses as per urban/rural divides

Neighbourhood conditions	<i>Number of responses indicating defined variables have "big effect" on life of learner</i>					
	Urban		Rural		Total in terms of total learner population	
	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
Violence and crime	113	66.90	56	33.10	169	42.9
Gangsterism	127	76.50	39	23.50	166	42.0
Poverty and unemployment	106	67.50	51	32.50	157	39.8
Teenage pregnancy	91	67.40	44	32.60	135	34.4
Sexual abuse	90	66.20	46	33.80	136	34.4
HIV/AIDS	69	58.00	50	42.00	119	30.4
Lack of safety	70	72.90	26	27.10	96	24.2
Peer group pressure	61	64.20	34	35.80	95	24.1
Substance abuse	58	65.90	30	34.10	88	22.3
Domestic violence	56	61.60	33	38.40	86	21.8
Lack of safety at school	62	72.90	23	27.10	85	21.6
Lack of recreational activities	41	65.10	22	34.90	63	16%

Source: Primary data

ing to violence and crime, lack of safety, teenage pregnancy, HIV/AIDS, sexual abuse and the effects of peer pressure.

The results show female learners also to be more affected by issues relating to substance abuse, unemployment, poverty, peer pressure and a lack of recreational facilities in the townships, than their male counterparts. The data does indeed confirm the precarious position of young female learners in a male-dominated and macho sociological working class environment, one that is often fed by, inspired by and sustained by traditional values of patriarchal supremacy. What is clear from this study is that female learners feel and experience the effects of adverse neighbourhood conditions as well as a negative personal and domestic environment – and its subsequent consequences – more acutely than males do. This applies to all indicators measured in this study, particularly with regards to sexual abuse and domestic violence.

Safety and Security

This research established that a high percentage of learners attending underperforming schools feel unsafe in the areas in which they live. Many of them fear for their lives. According to one principal, learners are sometimes mugged on their way to and from school and 64% of the principals rated the area in which their school was located as unsafe, while 9% said the area was very unsafe.

The majority (56%) of learners indicated they do not feel safe in the area in which they live, with the majority (68%) of girls sharing this view compared to the 32% of boys. Not unexpectedly, the data further shows that, in general, learners living in rural areas have a greater sense of safety (69% indicated they feel safe where they live) than those living in urban areas (46% indicated they feel safe).

Despite these high levels of perception around a lack of safety, the majority of learners (74%) indicated that they still had to walk to school daily. Of these, the majority (64%) were female learners. When asked why they felt unsafe, the most referred to the high crime rate in their area specifying violent crimes, theft, robbery and the occurrence of gangs. Some learners also referred to a pervasive lack of (or dysfunctional) infrastructure in townships, for example, street lights that are not working, as well as fragile and insecure housing structures that contribute to them feeling unsafe and vulnerable.

Hungry Learners

The inequity in South African society is forcefully illustrated by the differential access to good nutrition that different communities enjoy. Whereas upper working class, middle class and wealthy households experience no significant food insecurity, this is not the case for millions of lower working class people and those where the breadwinners are unemployed,

All schools included in this study had feeding programmes, operated by groups of local women. It was evident that they were doing excellent work. At some schools food was supplied every day of the week. In the cases where food was only provided twice or three times a week, principals reported that attendance dropped significantly on the days when no food was provided at school.

It is clear from this study that local and foreign African learners are the most vulnerable cohort to food insecurity, with 36% and 21% respectively answering in the affirmative, compared to only 12% of Coloured learners. With regards to chronic hunger, the foreign African learners seem particularly vulnerable with 5% of learners indicating this as a daily reality, compared to 2% of local African learners.

CONCLUSION

The paper discusses various issues related to the socioeconomic conditions of underperforming high schools in the Western Cape Province. The paper looked at the household, for example, household structure, physical infrastructure, level of parental involvement and other factors that give insight into the home environment and household characteristics of learners. Inadequate access to basic services and housing directly impacts on hygiene levels and the overall health status of a household in general, and school children in particular. The more frequently learners are ill, the more they are absent from school. This results in them falling further and further behind in their schoolwork, with disastrous consequences for learner attainment. It also dealt with issues related to general neighbourhood conditions by examining issues related to hunger, poverty and other forms of material deprivation, safety and security, etc.

The most glaring as highlighted in this article are the socio-economic challenges which most learners, teachers and Principals are confronted by every day, this results in a lack of adequate and sufficient resources in the classroom. Furthermore, this extends beyond the classroom to the neighbourhood and homes from which the learners come and the social ills they face, such as the consequences of one of the highest rates of HIV and AIDS in the world, large scale unemployment, drug abuse, gangsterism and violence.

It is important to remember that these Principals are working in socio-economically disadvantaged areas with poor parents who do not have the resources to engage with the school as actively as those Principals in former model C or private schools, they are however able to produce thriving schools. This attests to not only their personal traits but to the exceptional examples of leadership displayed by these individuals.

It was also observed during the course of study was that irrespective of the support given by the government in terms of providing schools with infrastructure it was those schools with Principals that displayed leadership qualities who were able to make the most impact and produce the most successful learners. They engaged the community, enrolled the community into their vision for the school.

In conclusion these factors collectively playing a major role in the poor performance of the affected (underperforming) schools. One of the strongest themes to emerge from this research, the possible causes for underperformance among learners concerns the lack of parental involvement and interest in their children – both in their general wellbeing and particularly in their school work. There was consensus amongst School Governing Boards, principals, School Management Teams and teachers in this regard. Therefore it is high time for the Government of South Africa to reform the entire educational system by addressing all the issues and thus improve the quality of education in the country.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This paper is based on the Programme to Support Pro-poor Policy Development (PSPPD) Presidency research project, South Africa that was undertaken in 2011. We sincerely acknowledge the cooperation and technical support that we received from Ms. Eigelaar-Meets while working on the Project.

NOTES

- 1 As the highest HIV population worldwide, 5.6 million people are estimated to be HIV positive, and 410,000 new infections were estimated for 2010, of which 40,000 were children (Statistics South Africa, 2010).
- 2 Note that for the sake of further analysis the one Asian student was grouped with the Coloured students.

- 3 Breadwinner is defined as the person who is the primary financial provider to the household.

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