

## Perceptions of stakeholders on causes of poor performance in Grade 12 in a province in South Africa

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Although a great deal of debate surrounds poor performance in Grade 12 National Examinations, very little research has addressed the factors influencing student performance. This paper gives an overview of causes of poor student performance in Grade 12. Stakeholders' perceptions on causes of poor student performance were gathered through interviews. The study revealed that major causes of poor student performance included lack of resources, lack of discipline and poor morale, problems concerning the implementation of policies, and inadequate parental involvement.

### Introduction

For the past three years a great proportion of Grade 12 learners have performed badly in the national examinations. For example, in the North West Province the pass rates in 1998, 1999 and 2000 were 54.0%, 52.1% and 58.2%, respectively (Riekert, 2000). All major stakeholders: learners, educators, parents, employers and the National Ministry of Education are concerned about the problem of poor student performance in the Grade 12 examinations in South Africa. This low internal efficiency of the education system simply implies more wastage and increases in the cost of education. By failing to complete their high school education within the minimum time, the social cost of secondary education increases without necessarily increasing the social benefits. The consequences lead to social costs of billions of Rand.

Whilst developed countries like the UK and the US concentrate on the improvement of the quality of education offered in schools, in South Africa more attention is needed on improving the pass rates in high schools. Poor student performance in Grade 12 examinations represents a challenge to all South Africans. Therefore, the need to gain a better picture of the causes and solutions to the problem cannot be over-emphasised. To this end, research was conducted to collect quantitative and qualitative data to determine the causes of the high failure rate in Grade 12.

### Statement of the problem

Research has shown that in developing countries dropout and repetition rates appear to be most common among students from low socio-economic backgrounds. In such countries, causes of high wastage and poor student performance include poverty, malnutrition, absenteeism, inappropriate curriculum and examinations, badly trained teachers, lack of textbooks and overcrowded classrooms (Lockhead & Verspoor, 1991:86-87; Pscharopoulos & Woodhall, 1985:209).

Ludwig and Bassi (1999) argued that with findings in the literature on the effects of school resources on student achievement, there is a possibility that studies confound the effects of school resources with those of unobserved variables. Most studies suggest that additional resources typically translate to gains in student achievement. Studies on the effects of number of variables on student performance such as resources, class-size, student-classroom ratio and pupil-teacher ratio, do not always give clear direction to policy makers (Finn & Achilles, 1999; Nye *et al.*, 1999; Hanushek, 1999; Molnar *et al.*, 1999; Hanushek, 1997; Edwards & Fisher, 1995; Harber, 1992; Edmonds, 1979).

Education policy makers and researchers rely on a wide range of outcomes to gauge the impact of policies on student performance.

Achievement tests, classroom observations and open-ended interviews are conducted to gain a better understanding of the factors that influence outcomes or student performance (Kennedy, 1999:345). Other methods employed include tracer studies, longitudinal tracer studies, follow up studies and cohort studies (Ma & Willems, 1999:365).

The above discussion clearly indicates that causes of poor student performance are complex. Documenting these factors by employing a one-off study is not always easy. Thus, in this research a multi-method research design appeared most suitable to arrive at a fairly satisfactory answer to this complex problem. Stakeholders are better able to define the kind of outcome sought, and are therefore also better able to identify factors which impede successful completion of the high school course. In South Africa, for example, Grade 12 examination results are used as a barometer to gauge the effectiveness and efficiency of the school system. Good performance in Grade 12 examinations is based on pass rates.

The purpose in this article is to examine the causes of poor performance in Grade 12. A major focus of the study is to identify and examine factors that cause poor performance in Grade 12 examinations through a multi-method approach that employed interviews, a questionnaire, observations and visits to sampled schools. The research focused on stakeholders, such as learners, educators and parents. However, the present article deals with the set of qualitative data, as the quantitative data have already been reported (see Van der Westhuizen *et al.*, 1999:315-319).

### Research design

The interview schedule employed was developed after a pilot study involving nine secondary schools. To gain a picture of the causes of poor student performance in Grade 12, interviews were conducted. School principals, educators, students, parents and chairpersons of school governing bodies from the schools involved in the sample were interviewed. A questionnaire was designed to gather data on the socio-economic background of the Grade 12 learners.

### Population and sampling

To make the study more manageable, a rural province was selected because of its proximity to the researchers. The province under study had 12 education districts. From each of the districts, four schools were selected through a process of stratified random sampling. A random digit table was used to select these schools. In each of the selected schools, a principal, four teachers and eight students, two parents and a chairperson of the school governing body were involved.

The three strata and number of schools per stratum were:

- One good school in each district where the pass rate was more

- than 80% (G);
- one average school in each district where the pass rate was between 40% and 60% (A); and
- two poor schools in each district where the pass rate was less than 35% (P).

Each school was awarded a code for statistical purposes. All the schools in the population, except those with an average pass rate between 61% and 79% and those with an average pass rate between 36% and 39% were included in the sampling process. The reason for the exclusion of these schools was to make a clear distinction among the three strata, i.e. good, average, and poor. Finding schools within all three categories was not possible in two districts. Table 1 displays the distribution of the sample population.

Interviews were conducted with the principals (n=48), educators (n=192), learners (n=384) students, chairpersons of each school governing body and two parents (n=144), officials of teacher unions (n=300, department officials (district managers and senior officials of the Department of Education) (n=32) representatives of student formations (n=18) displayed in Table 1.

In addition, a sample of 3 222 Grade 12 learners was requested to complete a questionnaire with a view to gaining a better picture of their socio-economic background.

**Table 1** Sample population for interviews

	Good	Average	Poor	Total
School	10	13	25	48
Principal	10	13	25	48
Teachers	40	52	100	192
Students	80	104	200	384
Parents	30	39	75	144
Union officials				30
Department office				32
Student form				18

**Results and discussion**

This section reports on the results of the data gathered from the learners' questionnaire, interviews conducted with educators, Grade 12 learners, members of teacher unions, student formations, chairpersons of school governing bodies and parents. The main purpose was to gather their views on the main causes of poor performance in Grade 12 national examinations. A variable analysis was conducted to categorize factors that contributed to poor performance in Grade 12. Frequency distributions for respondents were computed and summarized through use of tables. Initially, the socio-economic background of Grade 12 learners was determined by analysing the data collected from the questionnaire.

**Socio-economic background of the Grade 12 learners**

Occupation of parents was an important variable in determining the socio-economic background, because so many aspects of economic, political and social life are reflected by it (Legotlo, 1988). Income, power and status in society are clearly reflected by occupation and level of education. However, it is not a simple task to collect the relevant data describing one's occupation or getting the right job title. To cite an example, a successful modern farmer involved in intensive farming and a traditional farmer are both given the same job title.

To obtain a picture of the socio-economic background of the Grade 12 learners, parents' occupation and level of education were used as estimates of social status. Table 2 displays the occupations of the parents of the Grade 12 learners. The parents' occupations were grouped into low (unskilled and others), middle (skilled, business, artisans, service worker, middle professional, and clerical) and upper (high professional) social status.

The most striking observation that emerged from Table 2 was that more than half the sample (53.65%) of Grade 12 learners was drawn

from a low socio-economic background and only a small proportion (5.34%) was drawn from the upper socio-economic background. Legotlo (1988:29), in his study on the occupational outcomes of the Standard10 graduates in the then Bophuthatswana, revealed similar findings. In spite of the rural nature of the community, this high proportion of Grade 12 from the low socio-economic background is a reflection of the parents' ability to bear the burden of the high private cost of education.

From Table 2 more than half of Grade 12 learners are clearly drawn from families that are unlikely to be able to afford the cost of secondary education without the intervention of the state.

**Table 2** Socio-economic background of learners

Social status	Percentage
Low	53.65
Middle	41.01
Upper	5.34
Total	100%

**Education level of the learners' parents**

Table 3 shows that most of the parents (60%) had a secondary school education or lower level. What is more important, Table 3 shows that 13.4% of Grade 12 learners had parents with no schooling. Less than 10% had education higher than secondary education. This implies that in developing strategies for helping Grade 12 learners, the ability of the parents to intervene cannot be over-emphasized.

**Table 3** Level of education: parents

	Father	%	Mother	%	Total	%
No schooling	260	14.70	212	12.16	472	13.43
Primary education	260	14.70	340	19.51	600	17.08
Secondary education	1 082	61.16	1 030	50.09	2 112	60.13
Diploma	105	5.94	103	5.91	208	5.92
Post-graduate educ.	4	0.23	19	1.09	23	0.65
1st degree	58	3.27	39	2.24	98	2.79
Total	1 769		1 743		3 512	

The study suggests that the socio-economic background of learners may have some influence on learners' performance. More importantly, the data show that more than half of the Grade12 learners were drawn from a low socio-economic background, many of whom were undernourished and hungry, as observed during the field work. The consequence was that these learners may have learnt little in the school. It was observed in the field and from interviews with educators that the demand for child labour during the harvesting period attracted some learners.

**Causes of poor performance in Grade 12**

The respondents interviewed were asked to list and explain factors that cause poor learner performance in Grade 12. These factors (data) were categorized and frequencies of each category formed the basis for the analysis of data recurring. Themes emerging from both the interview schedule (principals, educators and learners, school governing bodies and parents, officials of teacher unions, district and other officials) and observations were classified into nine categories: inadequate resources, unclear government policy, ineffective school policies, lack of staff discipline, lack of staff commitment, union activities and lack of parental involvement, as displayed in Table 4. These factors are briefly discussed in the next section.

Table 4 displays the views of the respondents in order of acuteness. These factors were rated in descending order and discussed accordingly.

**Table 4** Causes of poor performance

Causes	Parents		Government officials		Pupils		Teacher unions		Student formation		Teacher		Principals	
	%	Rank	%	Rank	%	Rank	%	Rank	%	Rank	%	Rank	%	Rank
Lack of facilities	15.87	2	33.55	1	19.90	2	21.18	1	21.93	1	30.35	1	22.9	1
Resources/Personnel														
Inadequate parental involvement	3.94	9	5.16	8	2.55	9	6.40	6	7.02	7	8.31	5	10.1	9
SGB/Stakeholders														
Union disturbances	9.59	7	12.90	3	8.53	5	5.42	9	4.39	9	3.90	7	12.2	3
Unclear government policy	5.04	8	5.81	7	7.36	7	19.21	2	6.14	8	7.56	6	9.0	5
Ineffective school policy	11.93	5	9.03	4	10.42	4	13.79	3	21.05	2	3.53	8	8.0	6
Lack of student commitment	10.33	6	6.45	6	15.52	3	6.40	6	8.77	5	15.37	3	10.0	4
Lack of teacher commitment	12.92	3	14.84	2	6.05	8	11.82	4	10.53	4	11.46	4	7.1	8
Teacher discipline problems	12.92	3	5.16	8	8.24	6	6.40	6	7.89	6	3.15	9	7.7	6
Student discipline problems	17.47	1	7.10	5	21.43	1	9.36	5	12.28	3	16.37	2	13.7	2

#### *Lack of resources*

Lack of resources was rated by all respondents as the major cause of poor performance in Grade 12 (see Table 4). Shortage of physical facilities was a major problem as revealed by the respondents. Very few high schools visited were well equipped with electricity, libraries, laboratories, water or toilets. In some schools learners attended in classrooms without chairs, chalkboards, doors or windows. Similar findings were made by Legotlo and Van der Westhuizen (1996) in a study on problems facing new principals. Problems of inadequate resources, as revealed by the data, were:

- Inadequate textbooks  
All respondents mentioned the problem of shortage of relevant textbooks. Many learners did not have all the required books, and sometimes a class of 40 learners was required to share five copies of a textbook. In worse situations, learners depended on writing notes provided by the educator. The respondents argued that the learner textbook ratio was around 10:1, i.e. there was one textbook for every ten learners. On the question of textbook supply one educator remarked:  
"The Departmental (a provincial department of Education) supply of textbooks leaves much to be desired. The supply came late in the year. As results, our Std 9 and 10 students were without textbooks for almost the rest of the year."  
The impact of basic instructional aids, such as chalkboards and textbooks, was very high and led to complex problems of low morale and lack of commitment. Some learners argued that they did not do their work because of inadequate textbooks. For the past decades, researchers have found that unavailability of textbooks has negative impact on student achievement in developing countries.
- Shortage of learning and teaching aids  
Learning and teaching aids such as posters, charts, audiotapes, computers and E-mail facilities were not available in most schools. Research evidence has shown that this as a common problem in developing countries.
- Lack of and over-crowded classrooms  
Of the schools visited, some had facilities which were clearly inadequate and poorly maintained, whilst overcrowding in some schools was a serious problem. However, it was noted during fieldwork, that other problems related to overcrowding in schools were caused by shortage of educators. In some settings, more

than 60 learners were crammed into one classroom because of a shortage of relevant qualified educators and/or classrooms. These conditions led to other problems such as vandalism, theft and other socially unacceptable behaviour. One Grade 12 repeater remarked on the complex challenges caused by lack of classrooms as follows:

"Last year we (referring to the community) were building a new classroom. We (referring to the learners and educators) waited for the classroom to be completed and it was a long holiday for both students and teachers. We did not have enough time to complete the work. However, at the end of the year, the examiners when setting questions just set questions covering the whole syllabus."

- Shortage of relevant and qualified educators  
Respondents argued that there was a high shortage of experienced and effective teachers in some learning areas like Biology and Mathematics. Literature has shown that developing countries face the challenge of badly trained or under-qualified teachers. One learner, when remarking on challenges posed by badly trained educators, said:  
"Teachers, who are less qualified, do not know how to explain some calculations or difficulties in subjects such as maths and physical science. They confuse us rather than teach us."  
Inadequate teacher preparation and general limited academic background to some extent contribute to poor teaching and learning in some schools. Educators are themselves also products of a bad education system.

#### *Lack of student discipline*

Table 4 shows that student discipline was viewed as the second major cause of poor performance. Educators argued that some learners were ill-disciplined and difficult to work with. This affected the relationship between educators and learners. All these factors led to uncontrollable learners in the classroom where some learners intimidated educators and other learners. Such learners deliberately ignored instructions from educators; they left classrooms during lessons, came to school late and disappeared before noon. It was observed that an atmosphere of no work was the order of the day, and expecting them to do well in examinations it would have been a miracle. One learner remarked on ill-disciplined learners as follows:

"Lack of respect for educators is the main cause of discipline problems in the classroom. When students are asked to do something in class, they protest, and refuse to carry out the instruction. Most students abuse the so-called 'rights' and the teachers are unable to curb this situation, more especially after the abolition of corporal punishment. Because they do not respect teachers, this leads to the process whereby a teacher chucks the student out of the class and he or she loses a lot. So teachers spend more time on student discipline issues. Students relax and neglect their school work until the last minute."

#### *Lack of student commitment*

The level of learners disruptive behaviour was increasing at a higher proportion and this impacted negatively on their commitment to work. Learners sometimes ignored the instructions of educators and promoted a culture of "no work". The respondents argued that some learners were more concerned about political activities and were leaders of disruptive organizations outside the school. On the other hand, others argued that learners were de-motivated because they did not have educators and books even if they had liked to study, and the value of education might be on the decline. Commenting on the impact of educated people's unemployment on student performance one head of department remarked as follows:

"Lack of job opportunities and high rates of unemployment among educated people is demotivating learners, e.g. many teachers are unemployed which encourages learners to overlook the value of education."

#### *Lack of educator discipline, commitment and morale*

The third major cause of poor performance as displayed by Table 4 was low educator commitment and morale. The respondents argued that educators' morale was very low as shown by high rates of absenteeism and truancy. When educators were late or absent from work teaching time was reduced. The causes were poor working conditions, inadequate curricula materials, unclear and confusing government policies particularly the right sizing policy. Occasionally learners were left without educators in some subjects for days. One parent remarked that some teachers absented themselves from schools particularly towards month-end. On this challenge of poor morale and lack of discipline, one educator remarked as follows:

"Lack of discipline among teachers and students has reached higher levels. There might be no punishment for educators and learners if they commit any offence. So they practice late-coming, absenteeism, non-performance of duties. In addition lack of job security has led teachers to market themselves in the private sector for worthwhile incentives. Educators always have to go on strike for higher salaries/increments."

One principal lamenting on the cause of poor educator morale said:

"... since the beginning of this school no textbooks for Std 9 and Std 10 maths were supplied. No substitution for the teachers who go on leave. In each school one or more teachers apply for sick leave or maternity leave and there are no substitutes. As a result students stay for three or more months without teachers for some learning areas. In addition, senior posts are not filled, e.g. deputy principal and HOD posts. So, teachers are working under very difficult conditions but with disgracing [*sic*]emoluments."

#### *Ineffective policies at school level: weak organisational structures and undeveloped managerial skills*

As indicated in Table 3, ineffective policies at school level was a fourth major cause of poor performance. Challenges raised were as follows:

- Legal authority and power  
The responsibility and accountability of the principal needs to be clearly defined. The principals and district officials agreed that their authority and power were somehow eroded by greater powers of unions, and rights and freedoms of the learners.

Principals were highly restrained by policies and collective agreements made at higher levels. They argued that the staff members who were teacher union representatives were often absent on union matters, and sometimes lessons were offered without a directive from anyone. To what extent are principals involved in decision-making that impacts on student learning? Do they have control over agreements that influence their day-to-day running of the school? These questions emerged during the interviews with principals and circuit managers. Worse still it appeared that union leaders were more informed and empowered on collective agreement issues than some school principals.

- No deputies and other support staff  
Some school principals were expected to run schools alone without the support of deputies, heads of department or clerical staff. The principals were left alone to run the schools without relevant administrative and management staff. In some schools visited, rotating staff or volunteers were called upon to help the principals. More often than not, such systems or strategies led to instability and continual changing of rules by whoever got into office.
- Ineffective instructional policies  
It was observed that not all school principals had a wide range of management skills. In addition it was clear from the data that some schools did not have clear policies relating to the instructional programme, such as classroom visits, homework policy, comprehensive subject policies that included policy on assessment and computation of final examination marks.

Supervision of instruction was somehow not effectively carried out. One principal, remarking on some problems related to supervision of instruction, said:

"The banning or the moratorium on class visits by principals and departmental heads: This situation makes it almost impossible for these heads to help the educators. As it is now, all checks and balances have been removed from the system."

This remark highlighted some problems in the interpretation, communication and implementation of new policies. The difference between written policy and practice was also revealed. Most principals did not have the signed collective agreements and relied on some union representatives to provide agreements.

In addition it was observed that learners and educators spent less time at school. So the importance of policies on time, task, and official school hours needs urgent attention.

- Medium of instruction  
Although mother tongue instruction is pedagogically justified, learners in most schools are taught through a foreign medium of instruction. This makes the understanding of complex concepts more difficult. It was observed that learners struggle to understand the language and therefore cannot understand the subject matter.
- Poor communication  
Respondents argued that there is poor communication between various levels, i.e. between the school and school community and between the schools and districts.

#### *Teacher union disturbances and problems in implementing collective agreements*

Since 1994, unionization of educators has been a major development in South Africa. More than 200 000 educators in South Africa belong to unions of their choice. The employer (the National Ministry of Education) has made several agreements with teacher unions, which include:

- access to work place;
- union meetings at the work place; and
- time off with full pay for union activities.

Respondents argued that major challenges emerged in implementing these agreements. Occasionally union officials had caused some dis-

turbance during normal working hours by holding meetings or taking time off. Respondents argued that some union members would prolong organized strikes, or take more teaching time than necessary to organize for a strike.

One chairperson of the school governing body remarked as follows:

"Teacher unions (particularly SADTU) played a most important role as they closed the school or took teachers out of school during school hours. Principals have no power over teachers, because of unions."

#### *Problems in implementing government policies*

From data collected policies of government clearly had a great impact on learner performance (see Table 4). In an attempt to reform the education system, government enacted many laws and adopted some new policies. However, not all policies were easy to implement. The data revealed that the Provincial Department of Education suffered from poor management procedures and unclear distribution of responsibilities for decision-making at various levels. Communication between various levels, districts and schools, and districts and the provincial and national departments of education were weak. To cite a few examples, the paradox in the right sizing of educators was clear enough. There was a shortage and oversupply of relevant educators in schools. Some issues raised under government policy included:

- **Ineffective policies and communication**  
Communication between schools and the Provincial Department of Education, especially regarding the appointment of educators, was rather confusing. Schools were uncertain how they should appoint educators and how educators could be transferred from one school to the other. Occasionally educators were temporarily redeployed to other schools without clear procedures and guidelines. Principals observed that they were almost powerless to control such "borrowed educators" regarding sick leave and regular attendance. More importantly, borrowed educators were sometimes not experts in specific areas where assistance was needed.
- **Shortage of senior management posts in schools**  
Many acting school principals, deputies and heads of departments were observed during the fieldwork. Surely school principals cannot be expected to run schools with unpaid school management teams.

#### *Poor organizational structure*

- **Poor Instructional support system**  
The principle responsibility of subject advisors was to provide professional support. The unavailability of subject advisors in some districts made it difficult for the available person to visit schools on a regular basis. These officers did not meet the expectations of the clients, namely, educators and learners. Resource constraints affected the professional support negatively.
- **Platoon system and double session**  
While platooning normally refers to two schools using the same facilities, it was observed that some schools were platooning while others were practising double sessions. The platoon system that was in place in some schools was a reflection of a shortage of classrooms and educators. An interesting observation was made where platooning was between various standards in the same school. The worrying factor was that in such situations educators were expected to teach both in the morning and in the afternoon classes, which meant that the old double session system was still in place. Remarking on the complex nature of "platooning" one principal said:

"For the past three years our Grade 12 learners "platooned" with the Grade 9s and 10s. That is, one grade would come in the morning and the other one in the afternoon, for four weeks, then alternatively."

- **Promotion criteria for learners**  
The current promotion criteria could be seen as automatic promotion; some learners were promoted from one grade to another grade, although they had not mastered the basic skills and knowledge. Commenting on problems related to policies on promotion one educator said:  
"Poor performance is in all grades. The only difference is in Grade 12 examinations where automatic promotion is not in place. For example, pupils are automatically promoted each year, without actually passing the specific standard. In matric, these pupils cannot cope with the work."
- **Changes in the Grade 12 examination format**  
Some learners and educators argued that Grade 12 candidates were confronted with an unknown examination format. Therefore, understanding and carrying out instructions seemed difficult. Candidates in Grade 12 failed to carry out examination instructions because they were not familiar with them. This problem pointed to issues in the introduction of change in the curricula and examination format, and inadequacy of the in-service training needed.

#### *Inadequate parental involvement*

A school is a unit within a society, and can only exist through the co-operation of a school community. Establishing a good school community relationship was a key ingredient to success in securing mutual participation of parents in decision-making, school activities, problem-solving, providing assistance and offering services to a school.

#### **Conclusion**

The findings of the research revealed that the factors that contributed to poor learners' performance in Grade 12 were not only complex in nature but were also intertwined. From analysis of the empirical data presented in this paper, major causes of poor Grade 12 student performance were related to policy issues and the harsh realities of managing schools in developing countries. These factors have also been revealed by other or similar studies conducted elsewhere.

More than anything else this study revealed that major causes of poor performance in Grade 12 examinations included inadequate physical and human resources, lack of discipline and commitment, ineffective and unclear policies, and failure to develop effective strategies to address the unanticipated consequences of implementing changes in the school system. The unanticipated consequences of the rationalisation of educators left policy implementers shocked by the harsh realities. In implementing the new textbook policy and new curricula, little attention was paid to the harsh realities of the poorest rural settings. To ascertain what works best under different settings in South Africa needs not only feasibility studies but constant monitoring of policies by independent researchers.

In sum, the study suggested that policy makers should consider the role of supporting resources to improve teaching and learning and to boost the morale of educators. Teacher commitment and morale cannot be over-emphasised. Although the study did not directly seek to reveal the correlations between socio-economic background and student performance, this seemed an important area for future research on student performance. If necessary steps are not taken, these problems will pose an increasing threat to the quality and efficiency of the school system in South Africa. Considerable attention must be paid to many questions that must be dealt with in designing policies and choosing alternatives of using resources.

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