

Access to Education

1



# Treading water

Enrolment, delays,  
and completion  
in South African  
schools

Sarah Meny-Gibert  
and Bev Russell



Social Surveys Africa is a specialist social research company based in Johannesburg, South Africa.

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## Enrolment, delays, and completion in South African schools

Sarah Meny-Gibert and Bev Russell

Findings from the Access to Education Study  
Volume 1

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**CALS**  
Centre for Applied  
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This publication is the outcome of a major research project entitled Access to Education in South Africa, jointly undertaken by Social Surveys and the Centre for Applied Legal Studies (CALS) of the University of the Witwatersrand.

The research team was led by Bev Russell, director of Social Surveys. Sarah Meny-Gibert was the senior researcher in charge of the study. Riaan Mostert and Lesley Parenzee helped to analyse the data. Irma Grundling drew the sample, and weighted the data. Jennifer Shindler computed gross and net enrolment ratios. Janey See and Riaan Mostert helped to clean the data, and Ndinda Makina provided data management support.

Field work was managed by Khathu Mathavha and Dale Howell. Dale Howell managed the team of coders, capturers and quality controllers, comprising Elizabeth Manley, Katlego Skosana, Nqulelwa Xhosa, Sandile Zwane, Mpho Mchaza, Marijke Smith and Amanda Mitchell.

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Social Surveys Africa  
2 Upper Park Drive, Forest Town  
Johannesburg, South Africa  
P O Box 32656, Braamfontein 2017  
Tel +27 11 486 1025  
Fax +27 11 486 1029  
[www.socialsurveys.co.za](http://www.socialsurveys.co.za)

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The photographs in this volume were taken by Khathu Mathavha, field manager, at Bolobedu in Limpopo, one of the sites of the qualitative research undertaken for this study.

# Contents

Preface	4
Acknowledgements	5
Abbreviations	5
<b>SECTION ONE About this study</b>	<b>7</b>
The scope of the study	9
Research process and method	10
<b>SECTION TWO Patterns of school enrolment and completion</b>	<b>13</b>
Enrolment of children aged seven to 18	13
Gross enrolment ratios	14
Levels of school completion	15
<b>SECTION THREE Delays in the South African schooling system</b>	<b>19</b>
Overview	19
The presence of over-aged learners in South African schools	20
<b>SECTION FOUR Repetition in the South African schooling system</b>	<b>29</b>
An overview	29
Interpreting repetition	30
Which youths are more likely to repeat, and repeat more often?	31
Summary of vulnerability to repetition	38
Conclusion	40
Endnotes	42
Bibliography	46
Appendix 1: Reference group	48
Appendix 2: Survey field workers	48

# Preface

*Treading Water* is the first in a series of three publications which present key findings from the Access to Education study undertaken by Social Surveys and the Centre for Applied Legal Studies (CALs) from late 2006 to 2009.

The purpose of the study, previously known as Barriers to Education, was to collect data on the access of children and youths to South African schools, and identify factors preventing them from attending school and completing their school education. The findings are based on a nationally representative household survey as well as qualitative research in urban and rural areas.

*Treading Water* provides an overview of enrolment and completion patterns in South African schools. It then takes a closer look at the extent, causes, and impact of schooling delays, with a particular focus on the repetition of school grades.

Volume 2, *Left Unfinished*, focuses on the temporary and permanent absence from school of children and youths aged seven to 18, profiles out-of-school youths, and explores why they are not in school.

Volume 3, *More than Getting through the School Gates*, conveys the findings of our survey of youths aged 16 to 18, and our qualitative research among youths, caregivers and educators. It provides a textured picture of the daily experiences of youths and the barriers to their meaningful participation in schooling (with a particular focus on the impact of poverty).

Each publication can be read on its own; however, the series is intended to provide a comprehensive picture of access to schooling in South Africa.

A detailed technical report on the national household survey is available from Social Surveys, and can be downloaded from [www.socialsurveys.co.za](http://www.socialsurveys.co.za).

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- Yusuf Sayed and Brahm Fleisch, for their constructive input; and
- Our field team, whose names are listed in Appendix Two.

# Abbreviations

ASER	Age-specific Enrolment Ratio
EMIS	Education Management Information System
FET	Further Education and Training
GER	Gross Enrolment Ratio
GHS	General Household Survey (Statistics South Africa)
NSC	National Senior Certificate
NER	Net Enrolment Ratio
SACMEQ	Southern African Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality
SES	Socio-economic Status





## About this study

**South Africa's post-apartheid** constitution enshrines the right to basic and further education. In line with this, the Schools Act of 1996 introduced compulsory schooling for all children aged seven to 15. It stated that public schools should admit learners and serve their educational requirements without any form of 'unfair discrimination'; and that no learners should be refused admission to a public school on the grounds that their parents had not paid or were unable to pay school fees.

From 2003 onwards, CALS assisted parents in the settlement of Thembelihle where some children were being barred from accessing schools due to their inability to pay school fees or registration fees. As a result, CALS and Social Surveys launched a major research project, entitled *Barriers to Education*, aimed at establishing the extent of this problem in South African schools, and identifying any other factors barring the access of children or youths to education which could similarly be regarded as 'unfair discrimination'.

In 2007, shortly after the project began, the government introduced no-fee schools in poorer areas (see Box 1). As a result of this important change, and the findings of the qualitative and pilot research conducted by Social Surveys, the scope of the study was broadened to include any factors affecting learners' access to schooling.

Meaningful access to education requires more than just 'getting through the school gates.' Access was therefore defined as the ability to participate meaningfully in school education, and data was collected on a range of factors which allow or prevent this. The conceptual framework for this approach is summarised in Table 1.

### Box 1: No-fee schools and fee exemptions

Government schools in South Africa are grouped into one of five quintiles. Based on the assumption that a school primarily serves the children in the community surrounding it, the classification is done on the basis of the socio-economic status of the surrounding community.

Quintile 1 schools are the poorest, and Quintile 5 schools the wealthiest (former Model C schools fall into this quintile). Quintile 1 schools receive progressively more funding per learner for non-personnel, non-capital expenditure than those in the higher quintiles.

In 2007, all Quintile 1 and Quintile 2 schools were made 'no-fee' schools, which meant that learners no longer had to pay school fees. Learners attending schools in the upper three quintiles who cannot afford the fees could apply for a partial or full exemption.<sup>1</sup>

In 2010, the no-fee school policy was extended to Quintile 3 schools. This means that parents of learners attending some 60 per cent of state schools in South Africa are exempted from paying fees.

The quintile system has been criticised, and is being reviewed by the Department of Basic Education.<sup>2</sup>

**Table 1: Dimensions of access to education researched in this study**

BASIC ACCESS	<b>Attendance:</b> enrolment in and attendance at school
	Enrolment and progression at the <b>appropriate age</b>
	<b>Consistent</b> attendance (conversely: absenteeism)
	<b>Contractual access:</b> school adherence to regulations which enable access for children
'ENABLING' ACCESS	Access to <b>physical and human resources</b> in schools
	Freedom from exposure to a range of harmful behaviours (bullying, sexual abuse etc) in schools

The annual General Household Survey (GHS) undertaken by Statistics South Africa showed high levels of enrolment for children and youths of compulsory schoolgoing age (seven to 15), but other surveys also pointed to low levels of school completion,<sup>3</sup> high levels of grade repetition, and high levels of prolonged absence from school.<sup>4</sup> Building a profile of children and youths who experience these delays or barriers to school completion became a key focus of our research.

## Box 2: The South African schooling system

The South African education system is divided into three bands:

**General Education and Training (GET), or Basic Education**, comprises Grades R to 9. This band is further divided into three phases, namely the Foundation Phase (Grades 1 to 3), Intermediate Phase (Grades 4 to 6), and Senior Phase (Grades 7 to 9).

**Further Education and Training (FET)** comprises Grades 10 to 12 (and equivalent levels in FET colleges).

**Higher education** comprises courses at tertiary institutions, including universities and colleges.

**Children have to attend school** until they have completed their Basic Education or until they turn 16 (whichever comes first).

**Children have to start school at age seven** or age six if they will turn seven before June. As of 2004, children aged five turning six before 30 June can be admitted to Grade 1, although seven remains the age at which compulsory education begins.<sup>5</sup>

The **age-grade norms** specify how old children should be in each grade (i.e. if their progression through the system has not been delayed). This is calculated by adding 6 to the grade number (age seven in Grade 1, age eight in Grade 2, and so on).

## The scope of the study

In terms of the South African Schools Act, children have to attend school from the first day of the school year in which they turn seven until the last day of the school year in which they turn 15, or the end of Grade 9, whichever comes first.<sup>6</sup> Should a child move through the school system without repeating or missing school for substantial periods of time, he or she will be 17 or 18 when they matriculate. It was partly for this reason that the Access to Education household survey focused on the seven to 18-year age group. Collecting additional data on older youths out of school would have been desirable, but budget and time constraints had to be taken into account.

The survey captured data on all learners in school (irrespective of age), as well as children and youths out of school aged five to 18 years. Data was collected for those attending (or having left) public or private schools, including ordinary schools, Further Education and Training (FET) colleges, and schools catering for learners with special needs. Additional qualitative research was conducted on youths from age 16 to their early twenties.

## Research process and method

Key stakeholders in education were consulted throughout the project. A reference group was established comprising representatives of the Department of Basic Education, educationalists, child rights specialists, and experts on research methods (see Appendix 1).

Research began in late 2006 with a comprehensive literature review. Qualitative research was conducted in 2007 comprising focus group discussions with caregivers, youths, and educators in a range of formal and informal settlements in Gauteng and Limpopo.

The household survey<sup>7</sup> was conducted from late October to the first week in December 2007, and the booster survey in early 2008. Comprising 4 498 households throughout the country, the sample was both nationally and provincially representative. Data was weighted up to the national population.

In early 2010, given the findings of the household survey, Social Surveys conducted additional qualitative research on over-aged learners and their impact on their edu-

### Box 3: The sample frame

Statistics South Africa classifies all enumerator areas in the country into settlement types (such as formal settlements, informal settlements, and so on). This is done on the basis of their geographic location and the kinds of dwellings most common in the area in question. Enumerator areas are then aggregated into sub-places. We used the sub-place classification of the 2001 census as the basis for our sampling frame.

Our sample was drawn from formal sub-places, informal sub-places, farm sub-places, small-holding sub-places,<sup>8</sup> and traditional sub-places (described as 'tribal areas' in the census). Other settlement types – including industrial areas and recreational areas, such as holiday resorts – were not considered relevant for a household survey.

**Farm sub-places** are essentially commercial farms. Households in in this category were randomly selected, and included those of farmers, farm labourers, and other people living on farms.

**Traditional areas** are communal areas governed by traditional authorities. They are predominantly rural, and largely correspond to the former homelands.

**Informal sub-places** are settlements largely comprising informal dwellings, ie, shacks.

**Formal sub-places** are structured settlements which are provided with municipal services, and on which primarily formal dwellings are located. This category is very broad as it ranges from formal townships to middle-income suburbs in towns and cities.

cators and younger peers. In-depth interviews and focus discussions were held with learners, educators, and younger peers in the township of Bekkersdal on the West Rand in Gauteng, and the rural villages of Mamaila Molototsi and Bellevue in Limpopo.

The main person we interviewed in every household was the primary caregiver, defined as the person most closely involved in the education of the children in the household. Youths aged 16 to 18 were interviewed on the basis of a separate questionnaire (which we refer to as the youth survey). This data was not weighted to the national population.

The study and questionnaires were approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of the Witwatersrand.<sup>9</sup> Respondents (both caregivers and youths) consented in writing before being interviewed.





# Patterns of school enrolment and completion

**At first glance**, South Africa has much to celebrate in respect of access to schooling. As will be shown in this chapter, the vast majority of children and youths aged seven to 18 are in school. More specifically, almost all children of compulsory schoolgoing age are at school, and youths are very persistent in continuing school education beyond this age despite the multiple hurdles presented by poverty, among other factors. However, this culture of school attendance does not translate into high levels of matric completion.

## Enrolment of children aged seven to 18

In 2007, according to our household survey, 96 per cent of children and youths aged seven to 18 were in school, with only 1,2 per cent of children of compulsory schoolgoing age (seven to 15) not attending school.<sup>10</sup> Age-specific enrolment rates (the percentage of children or youths of a given age in school) are given in Table 2.

**Table 2: Age-specific enrolment rates, 2007**

Age	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
% out of school	14.7%	17.4%	2.9%	1.0%	0.6%	0.5%	0.5%
% in school	85.3%	82.6%	97.1%	99.0%	99.4%	99.5%	99.5%
TOTAL	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Age	12	13	14	15	16	17	18
% out of school	0.7%	0.5%	1.4%	2.9%	5.2%	11.4%	13.5%
% in school	99.3%	99.5%	98.6%	97.1%	94.5%	87.8%	79.5%
% with matric/ diploma	0%	0%	0%	0%	0.3%	0.8%	7.0%
TOTAL	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

n=11 228. Source: Household Survey, Access to Education, 2007.

The table shows that enrolment rates remained very high up to age 15, dropping progressively from age 16 to age 18. However, the fact that 99 per cent of children and youths aged seven to 15 are in school does not mean that the majority are obtaining a full primary or basic education – they may, for example, start school late or repeat often, and leave school at age 16 with a Grade 4 education. In order to determine the level of participation or ‘take-up’ in the major schooling bands and phases, we calculated gross enrolment ratios (GERs).

## Gross enrolment ratios

Gross enrolment ratios (GERs) express the difference between potential and actual learners in a given educational band. GERs are utilised by agencies worldwide, including the United Nations, and are also calculated by the Department of Basic Education. They are useful because they serve as primary indicators of participation in schooling, or progress made towards achieving goals of access. Methods for calculating them are set out in Box 4.

GERs for the major schooling bands and phases calculated from our household survey are given in Table 3.

### **Box 4: Calculating gross enrolment ratios**

GERs are calculated by taking all the learners in a particular grade or phase (irrespective of their age), dividing this figure by the number of children or youths of the correct age for that grade or phase, and multiplying this by 100 to obtain a percentage.

GERs of more than 100 per cent are possible if there are children younger or older than the correct age in the grade or phase in question (i.e., there are more learners in the given segment than children or youths of the official age for that segment).<sup>11</sup>

The data needed to calculate GERs can either be gathered from a national household survey (enrolment figures per grade or phase as well as population data), or using enrolment data from school records and population figures from a national household survey. We computed GERs on the basis of our national household survey. The Department of Basic Education computes its GERS from Education Management Information System (EMIS) data collected from schools and mid-year population projections by Statistics South Africa.



**Table 3: Gross enrolment ratios, 2007**

School bands and phases	Gross enrolment rate
GET (Grades 1 to 9)	110,5%
FET (Grades 10 to 12)	94,9%
Primary school (Grades 1 to 7)	113,6%
Secondary school (Grades 8 to 12)	96,5%

Source: Household Survey, Access to Education, 2007.

GERs for the GET phase are very high; in fact, the GERs were over 100 per cent for all grades except Grades 7 and 9 (the GER for Grade 9 was 93,7 percent). High GERs are encouraging to the extent that they point to high levels of participation. However, GERs of over 100 per cent in so many grades indicates a high incidence of learners who are older or younger than the age-grade norms. In South Africa this is generally the former – a subject we will return to shortly.

However, the GER for the FET band (Grades 10 to 12) drops to 94,9 per cent, reaching a low of 82,7 per cent in Grade 12. The Department of Basic Education provides an even lower estimate of 86 per cent for the FET band<sup>12</sup> (although this excludes youth enrolment in relevant grades in FET colleges: see Box 5). These figures show that many more learners drop out during FET than during GET.

#### **Box 5: Comparing GERs**

The GERs calculated on the basis of our research are higher than those calculated by the Department of Basic Education. For example, while our GER for primary schools is 113,6 per cent, the department's calculation for 2007 is 103 per cent. The GERs for secondary schools are 96,5 per cent and 91 per cent respectively. The GERs for secondary schools and the FET band may differ because our calculations include enrolment at relevant levels in FET colleges. The department itself has noted that this will increase GERs substantially.<sup>13</sup> For example, according to its own calculations, the GER for secondary schools increased from 89 per cent to 94 per cent in 2005 for this reason (comparative 2007 data was not presented).<sup>14</sup>

## **Levels of school completion**

The Department of Education's Trends in Education Macro-Indicators (2009) presents the level of school completion by calculating the 'achieved completion rates' for various grades. This is done by calculating the proportion of people in a particular age range who have completed a specific grade. The highest completion rate for a single age is taken as the completion rate for the grade in question.

According to the Department of Basic Education, the ‘achieved completion rate’ in 2007 for primary schools was 93 per cent for Grade 7, and 83 per cent for the GET band.<sup>15</sup> The achievement rate for Grade 12 was only 44 per cent.

As can be seen from Table 4, completion rates improved slightly from 1997 to 2007.

**Table 4: Completion rate (alternative calculation), 1997 to 2007**

	Grade 7	Grade 9	Grade 12
1997	89%	75%	37%
1999	90%	76%	41%
2001	90%	77%	42%
2002	91%	79%	40%
2003	92%	79%	42%
2004	92%	82%	42%
2005	93%	81%	42%
2006	93%	82%	43%
2007	93%	83%	44%

Source: Calculated from 1997 and 1999 October Household Surveys; 2001 and 2002 September Labour Force Surveys; and 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006 and 2007 General Household Surveys. Reproduced from Department of Education, Trends in Education Macro-Indicators, 2009.

We have seen that enrolment rates are very high up to age 15, dropping to 80 per cent by age 18. Given this, one would have expected a higher level of matric completion than shown in Table 4. Part of the explanation for the low completion rates lies in the fact that the matric (or National Senior Certificate) exam remains an insurmountable hurdle for many learners (see Box 6).

#### **Box 6: National Senior Certificate pass rate, 2007<sup>16</sup>**

In 2007, a total of 368 217 learners passed the NSC exams, amounting to a pass rate of 65,2 per cent (compared to 66,5 per cent in 2006). Aggregate pass rates varied widely among provinces. The two top performing provinces were the Western Cape and Gauteng, with pass rates of 80,6 per cent and 74,6 per cent respectively. The pass rate in the Eastern Cape was 57,1 per cent, with Limpopo only one percent ahead. The percentage of learners who passed matric with an ‘endorsement’, which enables them to apply for entry to higher education, was 15,1 per cent (slightly lower than the previous couple of years by a few percentage points, possibly as a result of the educators’ strike).

Another important reason is the mismatch between the actual age of learners per grade and the age-grade norms. According to our household survey, 66 percent of 18-year-olds at school had not yet reached Grade 12. School delays are a common experience for many South African children, and we explore this phenomenon in the following chapter.

### Box 7: Calculating net enrolment ratios

The net enrolment ratio (NER) is an internationally utilised indicator of access to school education. It reflects the percentage of learners who are in school and appropriately aged for their grade or phase. It therefore measures participation in schooling as well as the efficiency of schooling systems. NERs are calculated by dividing the number of correctly aged learners in a particular grade or phase by population figures for that age or age group, and multiplying the result by 100.<sup>17</sup>

We calculated NERs based on our survey data for 2007; the results are reflected in Table 5.

**Table 5: Net enrolment ratios, 2007**

School phase or band	Net enrolment ratio	Percent enrolled in incorrect phase for their age
Primary school	95.4%	3.5%
Secondary school	74.6%	17.1%
GET	95.3%	3.6%
FET	60.0%	27.8%
All grades	94.5%	1.6%

Source: Household survey, Access to Education, 2007.

The NER for the primary school phase and the GET band was very high, but dropped off significantly for secondary schools and the FET band.

By comparing the NERs for each school phase or band with the enrolment rates for correctly aged learners for those phases or bands, one can establish the proportion of children enrolled in the wrong phase for their age.

In 2007, 17 per cent of learners aged 14 to 18 (the correct ages for Grades 8 to 12) were still in the GET band. Moreover, no less than 27,8 per cent of learners aged 16 to 18 (the correct ages for Grades 10 to 12) were enrolled in Grade 9 or lower.



# Delays in the South African schooling system

**A major feature** of the South African schooling system is that many children and youths move through it far more slowly than they should. As a result, ten percent of learners are three or more years older than the age-grade norms. In this chapter we explore the extent of schooling delays, its causes, and the impact of over-aged learners on the schooling system.

## Overview

Forty percent of learners enrolled in school in 2007 had experienced delays in their schooling at some point in their school career. Children and youths could experience three kinds of school delays (each with complex and often interlinked causes). Children enter school after the age of seven; they miss school temporarily for a year or more; or they repeat a grade (grade repetition itself can be as a result of having missed long periods of schooling, or, in the case of new entrants, starting school after the start of the academic year).

According to our household survey, 93 per cent of children and youths aged seven to 18 entered school before age eight, with an increasing trend towards children starting school at the right age.

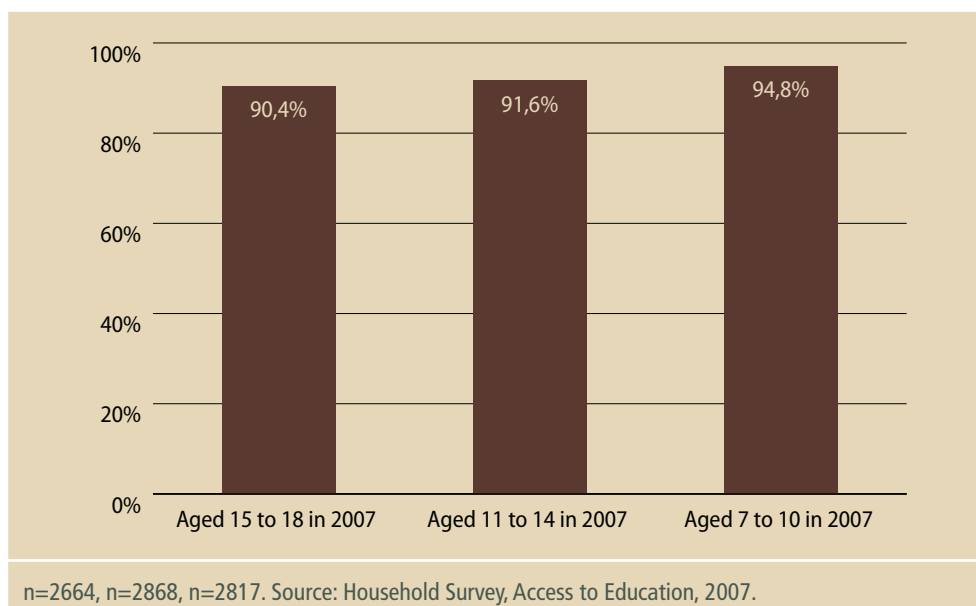
Four percent of learners had missed a year or more at some point in their school career, and returned to school thereafter; the figure for the FET band was 6,4 per cent. Long-term absence from schooling is explored in greater detail in the second volume in this series.

**Table 6: Children absent from school for a year or more, 2007**

School band	Never missed a year or more of school	Missed a year or more of school	TOTAL
GET (Grades 1 to 9)	96,4%	3,6%	100%
FET (Grades 10 to 12)	93,6%	6,4%	100%
Total	95,9%	4,1%	100%

n=8668. Source: Household Survey, Access to Education, 2007.

**Figure 1: Percentage of learners enrolled before age eight, 2007**



The most common reason for schooling delays in South Africa is the repetition of grades. A third of all learners enrolled in 2007 had repeated a grade at some point in their school career.

We do not know what percentage of learners had repeated a grade as a result of extended or frequent periods of absence from schooling. Most learners who had repeated a grade probably did not do so for this reason. Our data on learner absenteeism in 2007 indicates that few learners were absent for periods likely to have affected their performance to this extent.

According to our household survey, apart from absence caused by the 2007 educators' strike, 5 per cent of learners were absent for more than ten days during the year, and 3 per cent for more than 20 days.<sup>18</sup> Of those, 4 per cent had been absent for more than 10 days at a time. However, robust data on absenteeism is difficult to obtain (we discuss this further in the second publication in this series). Moreover, further research is needed on the link between temporary absence from schooling and grade repetition in South Africa.

## The presence of over-aged learners in South African schools

Under apartheid, age restrictions for school attendance were used as a way to keep youth activists out of schools.<sup>19</sup> Following the transition to democracy, and the introduction of legislation encouraging broader access to schooling, many out-of-school youths returned to school, thus increasing the number of over-aged learners in the system.<sup>20</sup>

### **Box 8: Siyanda's story**

Siyanda was born in the Ciskei in 1988. He entered school at age nine and remained in school for only two years. When he was ten years old his mother moved to Gauteng to live with his father, who was working on the mines and had stopped sending money back home. Siyanda's mother hoped to secure money for her sons, and save her seemingly failing marriage.

Siyanda and his younger brother were left without a permanent caregiver. For the next three years they did not go to school, and herded cattle instead. Siyanda re-entered Grade 3 at age 14 when many other 14-year-olds were in Grade 8. Siyanda and his brother have since joined their mother in Bekkersdal, where Siyanda is in Grade 12. He is now 23 years old. Interestingly, despite these disruptions, neither Siyanda nor his brother have repeated a grade in their school career.

Source: Qualitative research on over-aged learners, Access to Education, 2010.

Since 1998, learners have been allowed to repeat one year in each of the four school phases. If a learner is three years older than the age-grade norm, the Provincial Head of Department is meant to decide whether he or she should be admitted to a particular grade.<sup>21</sup>

The admissions policy also encourages the fast-tracking of over-aged learners unless this is not in their 'educational interest'. Learners aged 16 and older who have not made sufficient progress (criteria not defined) in their schooling or are entering the schooling system for the first time should be referred to Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET) centres.<sup>22</sup> ABET centres, however, are in short supply, and arguably not designed to cater for over-aged learners who are already in the schooling system and want to complete the formal school curriculum. Our data shows high levels of over-aged learners in mainstream schools.

In analysing our data on the age and age spread of learners in the schooling system, we divided learners into one of four categories:

- Those corresponding to age-grade norms and one year younger (appropriately aged);
- Those two or more years younger than the age-grade norm (under-age);
- Those one or two years older than the age-grade norm (over-aged type A); and
- Those three or more years above the age-grade norm (over-aged type B).

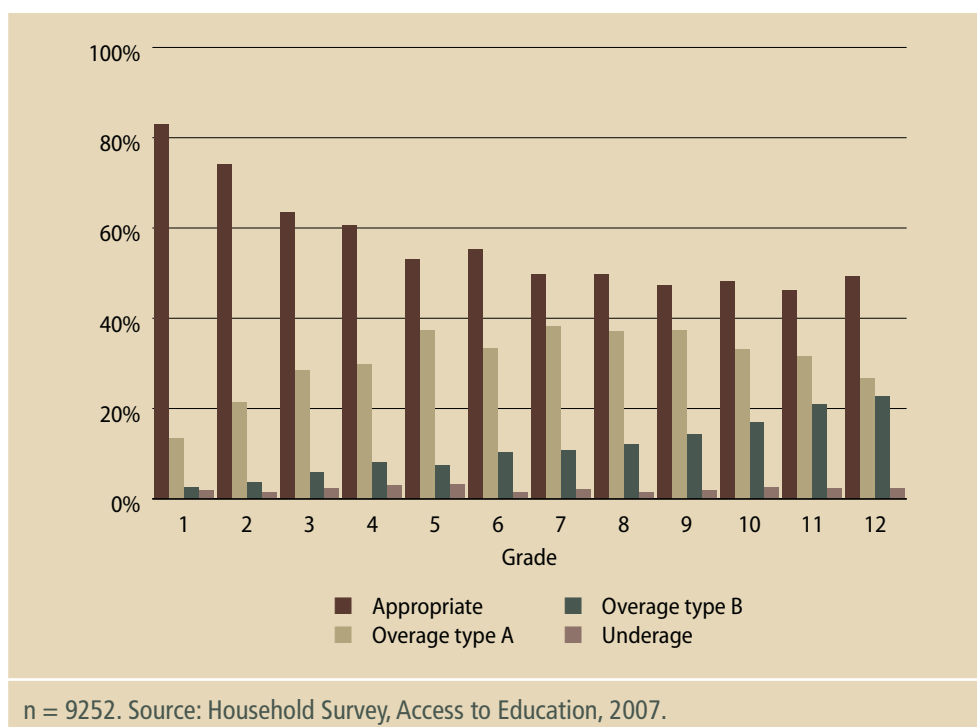
To some extent, these categories are arbitrary as there is no accepted or official definition of what constitutes an 'over-aged' learner. The point at which being older than

one's peers may hamper learning or social participation in schooling will vary, as will the teaching experiences of educators, and the impact on correctly aged learners. Our qualitative research on over-aged learners in two communities in Limpopo and Gauteng in 2010 shows that the experiences of over-aged learners, their educators, and their peers differ very widely (see Box 9).

While most learners enrolled in 2007 were either correctly aged or under-aged, 8 per cent of learners in the GET band and 19 per cent of those in the FET band were three or more years older than the age-grade norms for their grade.

Unsurprisingly, there were far more over-aged learners in the higher grades than the lower grades; while only 2 per cent of learners were three or more years above the age-grade norm for Grade 1, 14 per cent and 22 per cent of learners in Grades 9 and 12 fell in this category.

**Figure 2: Over-aged learners in the schooling system, 2007**



Because so many senior learners had previously experienced schooling delays, the ages of learners in a single grade varied widely. Our data indicates that a Grade 9 educator at an 'average' South African school could be teaching learners aged 13 to their early twenties.



Repetition is the primary reason for the large numbers of over-aged learners in our schools. For instance, 52 per cent of learners three or more years above the age-grade norms recorded in our household survey had been delayed by grade repetition.

Nevertheless, for over-aged learners Type B (those three or more years older than the age-grade norms), entering school after age seven and missing school for a year or more were still important explanatory factors. While 7 per cent of all learners in 2007 had entered school after age seven, 30 per cent of learners three or more years above the age-grade norm had entered school after age seven. Similarly, while only 4 per cent of learners had missed a year or more of schooling, 20 per cent of those three or more years above the age-grade norms had missed a year or more of schooling.



### **Box 9: Over-aged learners: preliminary findings**

Our qualitative research on over-aged learners shows that their experiences, those of their educators and their younger peers vary widely, suggesting that it would be unhelpful to posit a 'over-aged learner' problem.

Teaching learners of different ages in a single class may be challenging, as educators have to cater for children with different pedagogic and social needs.<sup>23</sup> International research in this respect tends to focus on multi-grade classes rather than children of different ages in a single grade. There is some debate about how learners are affected by being in a multi-grade class.<sup>24</sup> Studies do show that educators who teach children of different ages in the same class require more planning assistance and professional development.<sup>25</sup>

Educators we interviewed did speak of the challenges involved in attending to learners with a wide range of needs. However, over-aged learners were not the only ones struggling with the curriculae; most learners were struggling. An educator in Bekkersdal commented:

I have an intervention from half past two to four o'clock for Grade Elevens. I am teaching them how to read and write – can you believe it, Grade Elevens?

The educator felt that learners were not being adequately prepared for FET, and that learners were being 'pushed through' primary school (rather repeating grades). Many learners who had never repeated grades needed as much remediation as those who had. Another educator commented:

Ninety percent of our learners have challenges ...

Conversations with educators and learners also challenged the common assumption that over-aged learners disrupt teaching, and cause disciplinary problems. Some educators noted that over-aged learners did not accept instruction as easily as their younger peers, and that it was difficult to keep them motivated and engaged.

Some spoke about struggling to assert their authority over overaged learners. Others described how some over-aged learners helped them to maintain discipline, and some younger learners spoke of older learners protecting them against abusive or 'excessively strict' educators.

While the impact of multiple grade repetition on learners has been intensively researched, little research has been done on the impact of being over-age (the two are similar but not equivalent; for example, a learner who is over-aged because he or she entered school late may not experience the same impacts on his or her self-esteem as a learner who is older because of multiple grade repetitions).

What the research does show is that being over-aged as a result of repetition has negative effects on learners' self-esteem, relationships with classmates and

educators, and attitudes towards school. Some learners who had repeated a number of times spoke about how demotivating it was to repeat yet again, and expressed anxiety about returning to school to join a younger group of learners. Two of these learners were repeating the same grade for the third time. However, in terms of their social interaction with their peers and educators, not all learners who were significantly over-aged considered this to have a major bearing on their schooling experience. A Grade 11 learner in her early twenties commented:

I don't see myself old. I play with [the other learners] and they are not discriminating against me. As long as I don't have a child yet, I wear a uniform and go to school every day, I am still a school child. My mother knows that I am still a school child because I wear a uniform and go to school. So I don't feel out of place.

This statement may well be an assertion of how she would like to be seen and treated as much as, or rather than, the way she is. Nevertheless, our research showed that over-aged learners had different experiences (sometimes in the same school) depending on the attitudes of their educators, classmates, and household members. Their experiences could also be influenced by the proportion of learners in a class who were significantly older than the norm. In some schools in Limpopo, for example, large numbers of learners are significantly over-aged.

Molo was 23 years old and in Grade 12. He felt his classmates looked up to him and that he was not singled out by educators. Another over-aged learner who participated in the focus group discussions explained that in her class older learners were looked up to. It appears that being 'older' is associated with experience and status.

Other learners, however, shared stories of being teased and even humiliated by educators and/or learners. Phaliswe was a 22-year-old learner in Grade 12 attending school in Bekkersdal. She spoke of being made to feel acutely conscious of her age by her classmates:

[My age] forces me to isolate myself from the other learners. I find that in that moment when they raise the issue of over-age, I will just leave that group and go and stand alone ... that pain doesn't disappear. I feel as if they are continuing to talk about it.

Carol, too, felt singled out for being older than her peers, but by both learners and educators, who referred to her as 'Granny'.

Most over-aged learners we spoke to felt anxious and frustrated about the length of their passage through school. Those who had just begun to repeat a grade struggled to find the motivation to continue, and also wondered why they had failed yet again.

Source: Qualitative research on over-aged learners, Access to Education, 2010.

There are relatively more over-aged learners Type B in the Eastern Cape than other provinces, followed by Limpopo, North West and Mpumalanga. They are most likely to be black (11 per cent of black learners), followed by coloured (5 per cent), and Indian and white learners (less than 1 per cent). These over-aged learners are more likely to be male (12 per cent of male learners) than female (8 per cent), and less likely to have educated parents. The profile of learners who are significantly older than their peers closely mirrors the profile of those who have experienced multiple grade repetition. In the following section we explore the profile of learners who are vulnerable to repetition.



### Box 10: The school histories of four over-aged learners in 2010

The table below outlines the school history of four over-aged learners encountered in the course of our research. All but one had experienced different forms of school delays. Most of these delays were due to grade repetition. Despite the Department of Basic Education's ruling that learners should not repeat the same grade more than once, this still happens in some cases.

	Ntuli (born 1992)	Phathiswa (born 1988)	Molo (born 1987)	Siyanda (born 1988)
1994			Grade 1 (age 7)	Not enrolled (age 7)
1995		Grade 1 (age 7)	Grade 1	Not enrolled (age 8)
1996		Grade 2	Grade 2	Grade 1
1997	Grade 1 (age 6)	Grade 2	Grade 3	Grade 2
1998	Grade 1	Grade 3	Grade 3	Missed school (left without a permanent caregiver when mother migrated. Herded cattle while out of school).
1999	Grade 2	Grade 4	Grade 4	Missed school (as above)
2000	Grade 3	Grade 5	Grade 5	Missed school (as above)
2001	Grade 3	Grade 5	Grade 5	Grade 3
2002	Grade 4	Grade 6	Grade 6	Grade 4
2003	Grade 5	Grade 7	Grade 7 (claims to have skipped a grade)	Grade 5
2004	Grade 6	Grade 8	Grade 9	Grade 6
2005	Grade 6	Grade 9	Missed school to seek work	Grade 7
2006	Grade 7	Grade 9	Grade 10	Grade 8
2007	Grade 7	Grade 10	Grade 10 (migrated from KZN to Bekkersdal)	Grade 9
2008	Grade 8 (missed 6 months of school due to illness and migration)	Grade 10	Grade 10	Grade 10
2009	Grade 8	Grade 11	Grade 11	Grade 11
2010	Grade 8 (age 18)	Grade 12 (age 22)	Grade 12 (age 23)	Grade 12 (age 23)

Source: Qualitative research on over-aged learners, Access to Education, 2010.



# Repetition in the South African schooling system

**According to our** household survey, 35 per cent of learners who were in school in 2007 had repeated a grade at some point in their school career. As noted earlier, grade repetition is the main reason for delayed progression through the South African schooling system. This section reviews the extent of learner repetition, and explores the profile of learners who have repeated.

## An overview

According to our household survey, one in five learners in the Foundation Phase had already repeated grades, and just over half of the learners in the FET band had repeated. Disturbingly, 9 per cent of learners in the FET band had repeated three times or more.

**Table 7: Extent of grade repetition for all learners**

School Phase	Never repeated	Total repeated	Repeated once	Repeated twice	Repeated three times or more
Foundation Phase (Grades 1 to 3)	78.6%	21.40%	17.3%	3.6%	.5%
Intermediate Phase (Grades 4 to 6)	68.5%	31.40%	21.3%	7.2%	2.9%
Secondary Phase (Grades 7 to 9)	60.2%	39.80%	24.4%	9.8%	5.6%
FET (Grades 10 to 12)	48.5%	51.50%	27.8%	14.5%	9.2%
ALL PHASES	65.4%	34.6%	22.2%	8.3%	4.1%

n=9097. Source: Household Survey, Access to Education, 2007.

According to the report of a ministerial committee appointed in 2007 to examine learner retention, repetition (based on repeaters per 1 000 enrolments as recorded by EMIS) is highest in Grade 11, followed by Grade 10, Grade 9, and Grade 1.<sup>26</sup> The Trends in Macro-Indicators Report of the Department of Basic Education shows the same pattern, except that repetition is higher in Grade 8 than in Grade 9.<sup>27</sup>

High repetition rates in Grade 1 may be caused by educators holding back learners whom they feel are too young or not mature enough to progress to Grade 2. Moreover, in many low-income communities schools are less expensive than child-minding

activities such as crèches, given that 60 per cent of public schools are officially no-fee schools. However, most children in poorer communities are not exposed to formal early childhood development or pre-school education beyond basic child-minding, which may also contribute to the high repetition rates in Grade 1. High repetition rates in Grade 11 are often ascribed to schools preventing learners identified as likely to fail matric from progressing to Grade 12.<sup>28</sup>

It is hard to discern a clear trend in rates of repetition over the past few years from EMIS data, as the rates per grade vary greatly from year to year.<sup>29</sup>

## Interpreting repetition

International literature identifies a range of factors associated with grade repetition, broadly divided into 'supply-side factors' (those in schools) and 'out of school factors' (factors in the home or community, as well as learner characteristics).<sup>31</sup> Given that our

### Box 11: Data on repetition

Our data does not provide repetition rates per grade; rather, it shows the extent to which learners had repeated by the time they reached a particular grade or phase in 2007.

**Repetition rates** indicate the number of learners who repeat a given grade in a given year, expressed as a percentage of the previous year's enrolment for the same grade. This data is usually calculated from EMIS data, as household surveys do not generally capture all the data needed to work out the repetition rates (the Cape Area Panel Survey is an example of a household survey that does). Data on repetition in the Annual Schools Surveys of the Department of Basic Education appears to under-report the extent of repetition in South African schools.

According to UNESCO, this is a problem common to many developing countries.<sup>30</sup> It happens partly because schools conceal the extent of repetition, and partly because many schools do not accurately complete their Annual School Survey forms. The report of the Ministerial Committee on Learner Retention in the South African Schooling System (2008) notes that it is not always possible to tell whether a blank field in the EMIS database indicates no repetition (or no enrolment), or no data entered. In addition, children who drop out of school in mid-year and then re-enter the same grade a year or more later may not be counted as repeaters.

While the difficulties of gathering accurate data is widely accepted, more accurate data would be very helpful. In 2008 the Department of Basic Education launched the Learner Unit Record Information and Tracking System (LURTIS), which assigns a unique tracking number to each learner. According to the department, LURTIS should be fully operational by October 2010. For LURTIS to be an effective tool, however, data collected at the level will have to be more accurate.



### **Box 12: The link between repetition and learner aptitude in South Africa**

In South Africa, grade repetition may be a poor, or insufficient, proxy for learning outcomes. The Cape Area Panel Survey (CAP), among others, records major differences in grade repetition by race in the years 2002 to 2005. Analysis by Lam et al shows that the progression of black learners in poorly performing schools is weakly correlated with their ability and learning.<sup>32</sup>

There are large differences between the levels of achievement in independently administered tests for learners in former black and coloured schools on the one hand, and learners in former Indian and white schools on the other. Performance in the CAP test was related to the probability of repetition in former black schools; however, this correlation was far weaker for learners attending those schools than for those in former white or Indian schools.<sup>33</sup>

study was mainly based on a household survey, it primarily provides data related to out-of-school factors (particularly socio-economic and demographic variables).

Our results point to continuing inequalities of learning outcomes across race and class in South Africa. However, it is difficult to identify the reasons. Repetition shows that a learner has not mastered the curriculum, but this may be related to a range of factors which are often interlinked, including aptitude, the quality of teaching, the social and psychological environment (both in and out of school), and the learner's understanding of the language of instruction. As noted earlier, repetition may also result from lengthy periods of absence from school. Whether or not a learner repeats also depends on how well he or she is assessed.

## **Which youths are more likely to repeat, and repeat more often?**

### **The legacy of inequality: results by race**

Our survey shows that black and coloured learners are far more likely to repeat grades, and do so repeatedly, than white or Indian learners (see Table 8).

**Table 8: Repetition by race, 2007<sup>34</sup>**

Race	Total repeated	Repeated once	Repeated twice	Repeated three times or more	TOTAL
Black	37.0%	23.4%	8.9%	4.6%	100%
Coloured	27.8%	20.0%	6.1%	1.7%	100%
Indian/Asian	3.5%	3.5%	0.0%	0.0%	100%
White	6.5%	5.8%	0.6%	0.0%	100%

n=9060. Source: Household Survey, Access to Education, 2007.

While research points to a weak correlation between repetition on the one hand and ability and actual learning progress on the other, the fact that black children are six times more likely to repeat a grade than white children does point to major differences in learning outcomes by race, as shown by results from international tests such as the Southern African Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ).<sup>35</sup>

These statistics are heavily influenced by differences in the quality of teaching and levels of school resources accessed by different race groups. In addition, black and coloured children are more likely to live in poverty, which detracts from their ability to concentrate on their work (we explore the impact of poverty on learners' participation in education in Volume 3, entitled *More than Getting through the School Gates*). Black and coloured children are also less likely to have educated caregivers, which research has shown impacts on learners' chances of having to repeat.<sup>36</sup> We explore some of these factors below.

### Results by school quintile

The proportion of learners who had repeated was higher in the lower quintiles (though slightly higher in Quintile 2 than Quintile 1 schools).

These results are influenced by school resources and teaching quality, and possibly by the community and household resources of learners attending those schools. Two factors should be kept in mind when interpreting these results. First, the school a learner was attending in 2007 may be in a different quintile than of the school attended when the learner repeated. Second, contrary to popular belief, schools are not classified in terms of their own resources but in terms of the socio-economic status of the surrounding community.<sup>37</sup>

Research has shown that while the quintile system is not very good at ranking schools in the middle quintiles (for example, a Quintile 2 school may have more resources than a Quintile 3 school),<sup>38</sup> it is fairly effective in identifying schools at the extremes, namely Quintiles 1 and 5.<sup>39</sup> Therefore, the repetition rates of students attending Quintile 1 and 5 schools can be usefully compared (see Table 9). Previously white and Indian schools (which do produce substantially better results than than previously black and coloured

schools<sup>40</sup>) are clustered in Quintile 5, but do not comprise the entire group of schools in this quintile.

**Table 9: Repetition by type of school (quintile), 2007<sup>41</sup>**

Quintile	Total Repeated	Repeated once	Repeated twice	Repeated three times or more	TOTAL
Quintile 1	39.2%	23.1%	10.8%	5.4%	100%
Quintile 2	41.5%	26.4%	10.8%	4.3%	100%
Quintile 3	35.1%	22.4%	7.4%	5.3%	100%
Quintile 4	27.0%	19.0%	5.3%	2.7%	100%
Quintile 5	18.7%	13.4%	4.5%	.8%	100%

n=6751. Source: Household Survey, Access to Education, 2007.

## Socio-economic indicators

Other studies have shown a positive correlation between parents' education and their children's achievement at school.<sup>42</sup> Table 10 shows the number of times learners had repeated disaggregated by the educational attainment of the heads of their households. Only 11 per cent of learners living in households whose head had a tertiary education had repeated a grade, compared to 42 per cent of learners living in households whose head had no formal education. The number of times a learner repeated and the educational level of his or her parents are also closely correlated.

Moreover, repetition decreases steadily in households with increasing numbers of adults with matric of higher qualifications. This is certainly because households with better educated heads have higher incomes and therefore better access to resources, including better schools and other resources such as computers, books, and other learning aids.

Moreover, better educated caregivers or household heads are better able to help children with their homework (40 per cent of Grade 6 learners report being regularly assisted with reading and maths homework<sup>44</sup>), and more likely to provide an environment which coincides with those embodied in school curricula. The educational attainment of the household head is also an indicator of social class, and there are subtle ways in which middle-class children are privileged by the education system apart from being more likely to access better quality schooling.<sup>45</sup>

Learners in poor households are more likely to repeat grades, and vice versa.<sup>46</sup> However, this effect diminishes beyond a household income of R20 000 a month. We also analysed the linkages between repetition and a composite index of the socio-economic status of households, made up of a range of indicators such as access to infrastructure,

**Table 10: Repetition by education of head of household, 2007<sup>43</sup>**

Education of household head	Total repeated	Repeated once	Repeated twice	Repeated three times or more	TOTAL
No formal education	41.5%	25.3%	10.0%	6.2%	100%
Some /full primary education	40.5%	25.8%	10.3%	4.4%	100%
Some secondary education	33.0%	21.3%	7.8%	3.9%	100%
Grade 12/Form 5/NTC3	22.8%	15.1%	5.6%	2%	100%
Diploma/ certificate without matric*	25.3%	22.4%	2.3%	.6%	100%
Tertiary education	11.7%	9.1%	2.0%	.6%	100%
ABET*	47.5%	28.5%	3.9%	15.1%	100%

n=8887. \* Small sample. Source: Household Survey, Access to Education, 2007.

the employment of adult members, and so on.<sup>47</sup> Again, our analysis showed that learners' chances of repeating a grade strengthened steadily as the socio-economic status of their households worsened, and vice versa.<sup>48</sup>

### Learners' home language

We also established that English as a home language is closely correlated with repetition; learners in households which did not name English as a home language were three times more likely to repeat a grade than those in households which did name English as a home language (see Table 11).

There are many reasons for the improved performance of English-language speakers. In South Africa, the use of English at home is an indicator of social class, and English-speaking households are more likely to access resources which support success in education. Using quintile classification as a crude proxy for the resources of schools and their surrounding communities, our data shows that 79 per cent of learners with English as a home language – and 40 per cent of those with Afrikaans as a home language – attend private or Quintile 5 schools.

Moreover, English is the main language of instruction after the Foundation Phase, and the language used in tests and exams. Learners who do not regularly communicate in English find it more difficult to follow the curricula and understand exam questions.

According to our survey data, Sepedi-speakers are particularly vulnerable to multi-grade repetition. This may indicate specific geographical experiences of schooling.

**Table 11: Repetition by home language, 2007<sup>49</sup>**

Home language	Total Repeated	Repeated once	Repeated twice	Repeated three times or more	TOTAL
Afrikaans	24.3%	18.1%	5.1%	1.4%	100%
English	11.6%	9.2%	1.7%	0.7%	100%
IsiNdebele*	34%	19.2%	10.1%	9.2%	100%
IsiXhosa	36.1%	24.6%	9.0%	3.3%	100%
IsiZulu	32.9%	22.4%	8.1%	3.5%	100%
Sepedi	37.6%	22.5%	10.3%	8.2%	100%
Sesotho	35.4%	25.2%	7.6%	4.0%	100%
Setswana	32.1%	23.2%	7.6%	2.1%	100%
Siswati*	48.2%	23.2%	11.3%	5.5%	100%
Tshivenda*	44.8%	22.9%	13.4%	11.2%	100%
Xistsonga*	44.4%	26.6%	10.6%	7.2%	100%
*Small sample. n=8990. Source: Household Survey, Access to Education, 2007.					

(Most of these learners are in Limpopo, where repetition levels are among the highest in the country).

Our results also show that black learners living in households which named English as a home language were less likely to repeat a grade than those in households that did not name English as a home language; the figures were 27 per cent and 37 per cent respectively. However, black learners with English as a home language were still three times more likely to repeat a grade than their white counterparts.

## Location

Repetition was also closely correlated with the types of settlements in which learners and their families live, as listed in Box 3. The results are shown in Table 12.

**Table 12: Repetition by sub-place, 2007<sup>50</sup>**

Sub-place	Never repeated	Total repeated	Repeated once	Repeated twice	Repeated three times or more	TOTAL
Formal settlements	73.3%	26.7%	18.8%	5.2%	2.7%	100%
Informal settlements	67.9%	32.1%	21.2%	8.2%	2.6%	100%
Commercial farms	63.9%	36.1%	24.3%	10.7%	1%	100%
Traditional areas	58.2%	41.8%	25.1%	10.8%	6.0%	100%

n=9127. Source: Household Survey, Access to Education, 2007.

Living in a traditional area (predominantly rural areas in the former homelands) emerged as the most significant variable in predicting grade repetition.<sup>51</sup> Learners in those areas are also more prone to multiple repetitions. This may be heavily influenced by the quality of schools in the former homelands (combined with other socio-economic factors, learners' proficiency in English relative to those in urban locations, and so on). SACMEQ data on the relative performance of rural and urban schools in South Africa point to far poorer learning outcomes for learners in isolated rural areas than in large urban centres.<sup>52</sup>

Our data shows that learners in traditional areas are slightly less likely to miss a year or more of schooling or to experience temporarily absence of more than ten days at a time than learners on farms or in formal or informal settlements. Therefore, higher levels of grade repetition in traditional areas can not be explained by extended periods of absence from school.

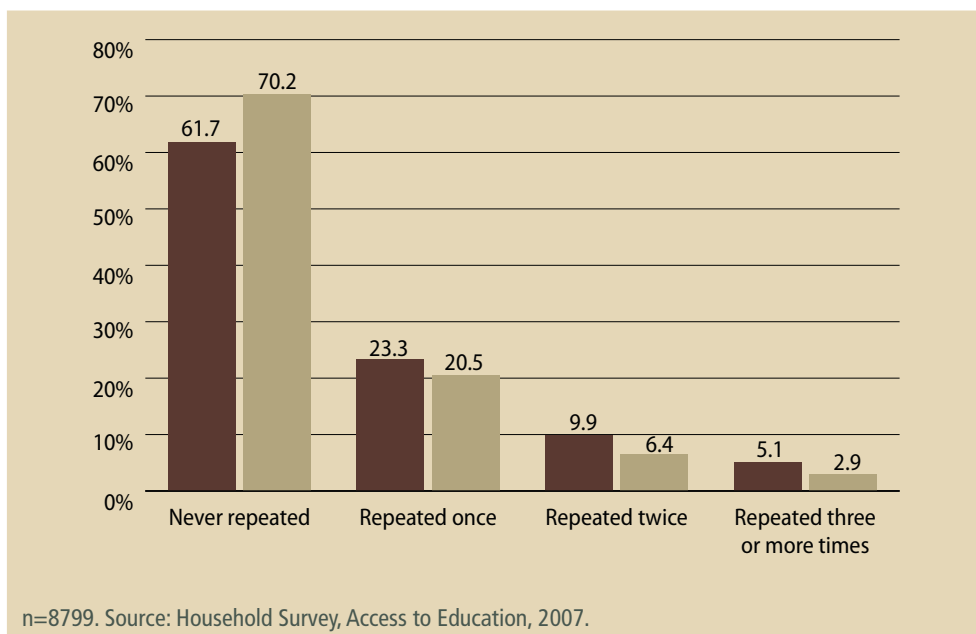
Grade repetition was most common in Mpumalanga and Limpopo, partly as a result of the high proportion of traditional areas in those provinces.

As noted earlier, the 'formal' category is very broad, ranging from low-income formal townships to wealthy suburbs, so the lower repetition levels in this category are therefore not surprising.

## Gender

Male children and youths were more likely to have repeated grades and to have repeated more than once, compared to female learners (see Figure 3). These results are consistent with departmental data on repetition rates, other domestic studies,<sup>53</sup> and international research.<sup>54</sup>

**Figure 3: Repetition by gender, 2007<sup>55</sup>**



These findings are consistent across all races, but the disparities are far greater in the case of black and coloured children; black and coloured girls were considerably less likely to repeat a grade than their male counterparts (see Table 13).

**Table 13: Repetition by gender and race, 2007<sup>56</sup>**

Race	Gender	Total repeated	Repeated once	Repeated twice	Repeated three times or more	TOTAL
Black	Male	40.7%	24.4%	10.7%	5.7%	100%
	Female	32.1%	21.9%	6.9%	3.3%	100%
Coloured	Male	31.7%	22.3%	6.6%	2.8%	100%
	Female	24.2%	18.0%	5.4%	0.7%	100%
Indian/ Asian	Male*	4.1%	4.1%	0.0%	0.0%	100%
	Female*	3.0%	3.0%	0.0%	0.0%	100%
White	Male	7.7%	6.9%	0.8%	0.0%	100%
	Female	5.5%	5.0%	0.5%	0.0%	100%

n=8731 \*Small sample. Source: Household Survey, Access to Education, 2007.

## Summary of vulnerability to repetition

Race appears as a film through which to view other variables, most plausibly pointing to the continuing inequalities of access to good schooling for black followed by coloured learners in the country.

Our study confirms the strong correlation between the socio-economic status of households and vulnerability to repetition identified in international studies, as well as that between parental education and repetition. It confirms previous findings of the impact of gender on grade repetition, with black male learners particularly likely to repeat multiple times. It has identified a particularly strong relationship between grade repetition and attending schools in the former homelands.

It has also identified significant associations between the home language of learners and their vulnerability to repetition. These demand additional research aimed at reaching a better understanding of the linkages among repetition, home language, and the language of instruction. Households surveys are limited in their ability to explore this subject, as many caregivers cannot provide accurate information about the use of languages at school. Besides the formal languages of instruction, many educators switch between languages depending on the subject matter, the mix of learners in the class, and so on.

International research has identified a range of additional factors which increase learners' vulnerability to grade repetition. At the level of the school, this includes teaching practices and skills, as well as the broader classroom and school environment (including, for example, the extent of psychological and social support for learners). At the household level, this includes the stability of family structures, and the involvement of parents in their children's school activities.<sup>57</sup>

At the individual level, factors influencing a learner's vulnerability to grade repetition include insufficient mental stimulation in the early years of a child's life, the impacts of extreme poverty (such as malnutrition), learning difficulties, and more.<sup>58</sup>

As regards learning difficulties, anecdotal evidence suggests that many educators in South Africa are unable to diagnose children with learning difficulties, and also do not have the skills to offer appropriate remedial interventions.



### **Box 13: Grade repetition and drop-out rates**

International research shows that learners who repeat grades are also more likely to drop out of school.<sup>59</sup> According to Jimerson et al, grade repetition is the 'most powerful predictor of drop-out status' identified in the literature.<sup>60</sup>

Local research confirm the former finding but not the latter, with coloured youths most likely to drop out as a result of repetition, followed by black youths.<sup>61</sup> Our data certainly shows that grade repetition and struggling academically can lead to learners dropping out. Ten percent of out-of-school youths interviewed in our youth survey (those aged 16 to 18) mentioned having to repeat a grade as a catalyst for leaving school, and our caregiver survey revealed that 14 per cent of out-of-school children and youths aged seven to 18 had left as a result of either struggling academically or having to repeat a grade.

However, we believe this factor may not be as powerful here as in the United States, the source of much of the international literature on this correlation. Given high levels of youth unemployment, the opportunity costs of being in school in South Africa are far lower than in many other countries. Moreover, the fact that repetition is so common in South Africa may work to 'normalise' and destigmatise grade repetition.

Multiple repeats (and other school delays which cause learners to be substantially older than their peers) may well have a larger impact on whether or not youths in their late teens and early twenties go on to complete their education, as the impact of being a young adult in a school system not designed for those in their twenties, and possible lack of learning progress made, really take their toll. More research is needed; we did not collect data on repetition by youths out of school and older than 18.

Learners who are much older than their peers but remain in school to write matric may still be at a substantial disadvantage than their younger peers. Drawing on a study in a high school in Guguletu in Cape Town, Anderson et al found a strong correlation between age and matric exam results,<sup>62</sup> with each additional year resulting in a decrease in the matric exam scores of between 0,5 to 2 percentage points. They noted that 'This effect may sound small, but is actually quite large when one considers that the average matric scores in this school were less than 30 per cent for most subjects, and that students ranged in age from 17 to 30. For many subjects, students who were age 18 in grade 12 (zero years behind) scored a full ten percentage points higher than students in their mid-twenties or older. For some subjects, such as mathematics and biology, this represents a halving of scores for students who have repeated several years.'<sup>63</sup>

# Conclusion

**Our study shows** that levels of enrolment of children and youths of compulsory schoolgoing age are very high, dropping from near-universal attendance at age 15 – the last compulsory year – to 78 per cent for 18-year-olds.

It also shows that our schooling system is hugely inefficient. Delays in learners' progress are common, with grade repetition the main culprit. Age-grade norms are an important benchmark, but the gap between this ideal and reality is stark.

Because so many learners are older than the age-grade norms, only examining the enrolment of learners aged seven to 18 masks the reality of FET completion. Our data shows that black youths from poorer backgrounds persevere for years, sometimes up to age 25. Yet this culture of persistent school attendance and years of investment by the state, households, and the learners themselves do not translate into matric completion. According to the GHS, in 2007 only 38 per cent of 19- to 24-year-olds completed matric or NTCIII (although it should be noted that a proportion of this age group are still in school). Youths are most likely to drop out during FET, and well after the compulsory schoolgoing age.

Our data shows that white and Indian children and youths – and middle-class children of all races – have a far smoother passage through the schooling system. Multiple factors impact on learners' vulnerability to grade repetition, but high levels of grade repetition will remain as long as the quality of education provided to most South Africans remains as poor as they are at present.

These findings, and the low levels of FET completion, raise some important policy issues. What exactly is our vision for education and training after compulsory schooling ends in Grade 9? Given our poor performance in this respect, should we continue to aspire to universal completion of the NSC? Instead, should we not concentrate on a sound basic education with a credible qualification at the end of Grade 9 which signals that those who have attained it have been well educated?

Policy-makers are faced with some more difficult questions. Do we want to discourage the attendance of those who are not progressing efficiently through school? Research has shown that schooling has a protective effect on youths.<sup>64</sup> Given our high levels of youth unemployment, and the failure of the economy to absorb low-skilled labourers, teenagers are more likely to engage in risky social behaviour if they do not attend school (falling pregnant, contracting HIV, becoming young fathers, engaging in substance abuse, and so on).<sup>65</sup> In addition, school is not just a place where learners go in the hope of getting an education, or 'to keep time moving' in the context of the low economic opportunity costs of being in school.<sup>66</sup> Despite the often appalling conditions in which

which our children and youths have to learn, school is a place for young people to be playful, make new friends, have their first relationships, and so on.<sup>67</sup>

Despite the high proportion of over-aged learners in our schools, research on this subject is lacking. We suggest that our preliminary findings about their presence in South African schools should be further explored, more specifically by researching their impact on teachers, broader classroom practices, and younger learners; and their own experiences of being significantly older than their peers. This should also include an assessment of the alternatives to mainstream schooling available for over-aged youths.



# Endnotes

- 1 The means tests was set out in regulations entitled *Exemption of Parents from the Payment of School Fees Regulations*, Government Notice 1293, Government Gazette 19347, October 1998. The new no-fee school policy is outlined in Department of Education, Amended National Norms & Standards for School Funding, Government Gazette No 29179, 31 August 2006; and the 2006 Regulations under the South African Schools Act, No 84 of 1996.
- 2 P Govender, Radical plan to provide poor schools with more funds, [www.timeslive.co.za](http://www.timeslive.co.za), 12 June 2010.
- 3 See results of the annual General Household Survey and the Quarterly Labour Force Survey at [www.statssa.gov.za](http://www.statssa.gov.za).
- 4 See the Cape Area Panel Survey at [www.caps.uct.ac.za](http://www.caps.uct.ac.za), for example.
- 5 Republic of South Africa, Education Laws Amendment Act, No 50 of 2002, *Government Gazette* No 24113, Cape Town, 28 November 2002.
- 6 Republic of South Africa, South African Schools Act, No 84 of 1996.
- 7 For details of the pilot survey, sampling, weighting, and data quality control, see Social Surveys, *Technical Report on the Household Survey*, at [www.socialsurveys.co.za](http://www.socialsurveys.co.za). Hard copies are available on request.
- 8 One smallholding sub-place was drawn (in Gauteng, on the edge of Tshwane) and subsumed for analysis under the formal sub-place.
- 9 Ethics Protocol Number H070901.
- 10 The results of the Access to Education survey are compared with other local surveys and compared with international research in Volume 2 in this series.
- 11 UNESCO Institute of Statistics, Education Indicators Technical Guidelines, November 2009.
- 12 Department of Education, Trends in Education Macro Indicators, 2009, Pretoria, p 22.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Ibid, p 23.
- 15 Ibid, p 44. Note that the standard calculation of completion rates refers to the number of learners who successfully completed the last grade of a given level of education, expressed as a percentage of the population of the relevant age group for that particular grade. It is calculated by dividing the number of learners, regardless of age, who were promoted from the last grade of a given level by the population of the age group that officially corresponds with the given grade, and multiplying the result by 100 (UNESCO Institute of Statistics, Education Indicators Technical Guidelines). The alternative calculation method is provided partly because produces a more accessible indicator of completion, and partly because completion rates calculated from EMIS data are unreliable. See Department of Education, Trends in Education Macro Indicators, p 43.
- 16 Department of Education, The 2007 senior certificate examination results: the numbers, media statement, 28 December 2007, at [http://wced.wcape.gov.za/home/service/doe\\_results2007.html](http://wced.wcape.gov.za/home/service/doe_results2007.html)
- 17 UNESCO Institute of Statistics, Education Indicators Technical Guidelines.

- 18 Data was collected in October and November 2007.
- 19 M Metcalfe, cited in Pretorius and Khupiso, 1998, cited in X Guzula and U K Hoadley, *Overage: A Study of Age-Grade Distribution in Grade 8, in Learner Progress and Achievement Study, Research Report 2, University of Cape Town, submitted to the Presidential Initiative, 1998, p 6.*
- 20 Guzula and Hoadley, *Overage: A Study of Age-Grade Distribution in Grade 8, p 6.*
- 22 Ibid.
- 23 S Motala et al, *Education Access in South Africa: An Analytic Report*, Consortium for Research on Educational Access, Transitions and Equity and the University of Witwatersrand Education Policy Unit, CREATE Country Paper, June 2007, p 60.
- 24 S Veenman, *Effects of multi-grade and multi-age classes reconsidered, Review of Educational Research*, 66(3), Fall, 1996, pp 323-340; and D A Mason and R B Burns, 1996). 'Simply no worse and no better' may simply be wrong: a critique of Veenman's conclusions about multi-grade classes, *Review of Educational Research*, 66 (3), Fall, 1996, pp 307-322.
- 25 See for example, K Cushman, *The whys and hows of the multiage primary classroom*, in D Sumner (ed), *Multiage classrooms: The ungrading of America's schools*, 1993, pp 20-25; and N H Peterborough, *Society for Developmental Education*, North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, United States, <http://www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/issues/methods/instrctn/in500.htm#contacts>.
- 26 Department of Education, *Learner Retention in the South African Schooling System: Report to the Minister of Education G N M Pandor, MP, May 2008, p 19.*
- 27 Department of Education, *Trends in Education Macro-Indicators*, Pretoria, 2009, p 50.
- 28 See for example, C De Souza, *Senior Certificate examinations 2002: plausible progress or passes below par?* In EduSource Data News No 39, Education Foundation, Houghton, May 2003; and F Arends, *The importance of intermediate and high skills development in the Western Cape: Background paper 1: The underpinning infrastructure: Public schooling in the Western Cape*. Human Sciences Research Council, commissioned by the Western Cape Micro Economic Strategy Project. October 2004.
- 29 See Department of Education, *Trends in Education Macro-Indicators*, p 50.
- 30 Ibid, p 47.
- 31 For a summary, see Department of Education, *Learner Retention in the South African Schooling System*, pp 67-68.
- 32 D Lam et al, *Schooling as a lottery: racial differences in school advancement in urban South Africa*, Research Report (Report 08-632), Population Studies Centre, University of Michigan, February 2008.
- 33 Ibid.
- 34 Too many cells with expected values of 1 or less. Results when combing white/Indian: statistically significant association ( $\chi^2=174.40$ , sig=0.000). Grouping learners into whether or not the learner has repeated: statistically significant association ( $\chi^2=171.67$ , sig=0.000).
- 35 See, for example, S Van der Berg, *How effective are poor schools? Poverty and educational outcomes in South Africa*, Stellenbosch Economic Working Papers: 06/06, Stellenbosch University, 2006, p 1.
- 36 J Brophy, *Grade Repetition*, International Academy of Education and International Institute of Educational Planning, Education Policy Series No 6, UNSECO, 2006.
- 37 A Chutgar and A Kanjee, *School Money: Funding the Flaws*, *HSRC Review*, vol 7 no 4, November 2009, at [http://www.hsrc.ac.za/HSRC\\_Review\\_Article-175.phtml](http://www.hsrc.ac.za/HSRC_Review_Article-175.phtml)

- 38 Ibid.
- 39 A Kanjee and A Chutgar, Accuracy of the poverty quintile system for classifying South African schools, Monitoring and Evaluation Colloquium, Gauteng Department of Education, Sandton, 20 November 2009, at [http://www.hsrc.ac.za/research/output/outputDocuments/6124\\_Kanje-Accuracyofpovertyquintile.pdf](http://www.hsrc.ac.za/research/output/outputDocuments/6124_Kanje-Accuracyofpovertyquintile.pdf)
- 40 See, for example, S Van der Berg, How effective are poor schools? Poverty and educational outcomes in South Africa, Stellenbosch Economic Working Papers: 06/06, Stellenbosch University, 2006, p 1.
- 41 Statistically significant association: ( $\chi^2=186.11$ , sig=0.000). We were not able to match the name of the school with the quintile in 100 per cent of the cases, as many caregivers seem to have provided a name by which the school is known colloquially versus its official name (used in the Department of Education's database). Some school names were incorrectly spelt by respondents, or incorrectly captured in field. No systematic bias was found in the cases we could not match with a quintile number.
- 42 In South Africa's case, see for example, A Anderson et al, Causes and consequences of schooling outcomes in South Africa: evidence from survey data, *Social Dynamics* vol 27 no 1, 2001, pp 37-59.
- 43 Statistically significant association: ( $\chi^2=274.44$ , sig=0.000).
- 44 N Taylor, The state of South African schools part 1: time and the regulation of consciousness, *Journal of Education*, no 46, 2009, p 26.
- 45 Ibid.
- 46 Results were statistically significant at the 1% significance level.
- 47 For more information on how the index was developed, see Technical Report on the Household Survey, at [www.socialsurveys.co.za](http://www.socialsurveys.co.za). Hand copies are available on request.
- 48 Logistic regression showed that the probability of repeating increases with a decrease in the SES score. Results were found to be statistically significant at a 1 per cent significance level. See the Technical Report for details.
- 49 Statistically significant association: ( $\chi^2=210.82$ , sig=0.013).
- 50 Statistically significant association: ( $\chi^2=181.09$ , sig=0.000).
- 51 Multivariate analysis: a classification tree was developed to explore the relationship between repetition and a range of socio-economic and demographic variables.
- 52 Van der Berg, How effective are poor schools?, p 6.
- 53 Department of Education, Trends in Education Macro-Indicators, p 47. Also see, for example, Lam et al, Schooling as a Lottery, p 11.
- 54 UNESCO Institute of Statistics, Global Education Digest 2010: Comparing Education Statistics around the World, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), Montreal, 2010.
- 55 Statistically significant association: ( $\chi^2=95.33$ , sig=0.000).
- 56 For males: statistically significant association: ( $\chi^2=89.83$ , sig=0.000) when running test by repeated / not repeated (too many cells with expected values of 1 and less). Females: Statistically significant association: ( $\chi^2=72.81$ , sig=0.000) - when running test by repeated / not repeated.
- 57 For a summary, see Department of Education, Learner Retention in the South African Schooling System, pp 67-8.
- 58 Ibid.
- 59 For a summary, see *ibid* p 68.
- 60 Cited in *ibid*, p 67.
- 61 Lam et al, Schooling as a Lottery, p 5.

- 62 K A Anderson et al, Causes and consequences of schooling outcomes in South Africa: Evidence from survey data, *Social Dynamics*, 27 (1), 2001.
- 63 Ibid, p 5.
- 64 C Lloyd and B Mensch, Implications of formal schooling for girls' transition to adulthood in developing countries, in C H Bledsoe et al (eds), *Critical Perspectives on Schooling and Fertility in the Developing World*, Washington, DC: National Academy Press, 1999.
- 65 See, for example, J Hargreaves et al, The association between school attendance, HIV infection and sexual behaviour in rural South Africa, *Journal of Epidemiological Community Health*, 62, 2008; and I Palmary & C Moat, *Preventing Criminality Among Young People*, Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation, Johannesburg, 2002.
- 66 A educator from Limpopo who took part in our research on over-aged learners commented that when she had asked an over-aged learner why she was still in school despite her age, she replied: 'To keep time moving.'
- 67 Personal communication with Veerle Dieltiens, 2008.

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## Appendix 1: Reference group

**Veerle Dieltiens**, researcher, Education Policy Unit, University of the Witwatersrand  
Dr **Peter Fridjhon**, head of the Department of Statistics and Actuarial Science, University of the Witwatersrand

**Katharine Hall**, senior researcher, Children's Institute, University of Cape Town

**Joy Mehlomakulu**, child rights co-ordinator, South African Human Rights Commission.

Dr **Shireen Motala**, formerly at the Education Policy Unit, University of the Witwatersrand, currently head of the Postgraduate Centre, University of Johannesburg

Dr **Hersheela Narsee**, director of Research Co-Ordination, Monitoring and Evaluation, Department of Basic Education

Professor **Clifford Odimegwu**, director of the demography and population studies programme, Department of Sociology, University of the Witwatersrand

**John Pampallis**, formerly at the Centre for Education Policy Development (CEPD), currently special advisor to the Minister of Higher Education and Training

Dr **Martin Prew**, formerly with Link Community Development, currently director of the CEPD

Dr **Vijay Reddy**, executive director of the Education, Science and Skills Development Research Programme, Human Sciences Research Council

## Appendix 2: Survey field workers

Keoagile Balatseng

Duane Damons (Cape only)

Marco Daniels (Cape only)

Angus Du Plessis (Cape only)

Lucinda Evans (Cape only)

Vuyakazi Galada

Tshepiso Hika

Sipho Khumalo

Mxolisi Kunene

Sharlotte Makgote

Jabulile Mantantana (supervisor)

Samuel Matsane

Livhuwani Matsheka

Mpho Mchaza (supervisor)

Zukiswa Mhambi

Lebogang Mokgele

Audrey Molaudzi

Albert Moleme (supervisor)

Mpho Mulaudzi (supervisor)

Zakhele Ndlela

Thami Ndlovu

Mondli Nhlapo

Lesego Nthlarapane

Malebogo Putu

Thabo Rakgwadi

Tshilidzi Ramasunga

Ntombi Simelane (supervisor)

Phumzile Soko (supervisor)

Sandile Zwane

