

OVER-AGE LEARNERS IN SOUTH AFRICA:

facts, figures and
possible interventions



prepared by social surveys

INTRODUCTION

This fact sheet is designed for educators, concerned community and parent organisations, as well as education officials. It provides facts and figures on over-age learners in South African schools – those learners who are substantially older than their school peers. It also provides suggestions for possible supporting interventions for these learners, their classmates and teachers.

This fact sheet, the last in a series of five, is based on the findings of the Access to Education study, which was undertaken by Social Surveys and the Centre for Applied Legal Studies (CALS). The study focuses on the barriers children and youth aged 7 to 18 face, entering and completing school. It began with in-depth conversations with educators, caregivers and youth in urban and rural communities on the difficulties youth face in remaining in school.

In late 2007 Social Surveys travelled across all the provinces in South Africa, conducting a nationally representative household survey with caregivers in 4400 households. Youth in these households who were aged 16 to 18 were also interviewed. Our survey showed that a large proportion of learners in South African schools are substantially older than the age-grade norm.

In 2010 Social Surveys conducted additional focus group discussions with over-age learners to find out more about their experiences of school (*these learners were three or more years older than the age they should have been for their grade*). Discussions were also held with their classmates and teachers.

FACTS

- *The age-grade norm specifies the age children should be in each grade (7 in Grade 1 and so on...).*
- *School policy in South Africa states that children should begin school at the age of seven.*
- *Ideally then a learner will be no older than fifteen in Grade 9, and 18 in Matric.*

HOW DO LEARNERS BECOME SUBSTANTIALLY OLDER THAN THEIR CLASSMATES?

Learners are older than the average age of their classmates because they experience delays to their progress through school. These can be caused by:

- Initially entering the school system late, or
- Missing school for substantial periods of time, or
- Repeating a grade.

Often, learners who are substantially older than their peers have experienced a combination of these school delays.

TYPES OF SCHOOL DELAYS	WHO IS MOST VULNERABLE?
Initially entering school late.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children who enter school late are generally from poor households (<i>though the large majority of South African children are starting school on time, even those children from very poor households</i>). • Children from poor households who migrate.
Repeating a grade.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The factors which increase a learner’s vulnerability to repeating a grade, and repeating a number of times are complex: levels of household poverty, the education level of caregivers, the quality of the education provided to learners, learners understanding of the language of instruction, all play a role. • For more information on grade repetition (see <i>Factsheet 4: Grade Repetition in South Africa</i>).



Missing school temporarily: learners may enter and exit school at intervals until most part of the academic year is missed and they therefore have to repeat the grade, or they may be absent from school for an entire year or more.

- Learners may be forced to leave school to look after sick family members (for example, family members with HIV/Aids) or to take on other domestic responsibilities.
- Households temporary inability to pay for a range of education costs (such as uniforms, transport etc) may also cause school disrupted.
- Learners in child-headed households are more vulnerable to missing school temporarily.
- Girl learners who become mothers are likely to experience disruptions to their schooling (see *Factsheet 3: Teenage Pregnancy and Access to Education in South Africa*).
- Learners who have to migrate to new homes, and possibly to live with different caregivers, due to trauma to the household, can experience major disruptions to their school attendance and academic performance. These traumas to the household may include a death in the family or unemployment which impacts on available household resources.

FACTS

- 14% of learners in Grade 9 were three or more years above the age grade norm.
- 22% of learners in Grade 12 were three or more years above the age grade norm.
- Just over 50% of learners in Grades 10 to 12 have repeated a grade, and 9% have repeated three or more times.
- 7% of learners started school after the age of seven.

Source: Household Survey: Caregiver interviews.



WHAT HAPPENS WHEN LEARNERS ARE SUBSTANTIALLY OLDER THAN THEIR CLASSMATES?

Experience of schooling for over-age learners

- Being substantially older than their peers may have an effect on a learners' self-esteem, relationships with classmates and teachers, and attitude towards school.
- Some learners are mocked by teachers or by other learners for being older than their classmates.
- Research in South Africa and internationally shows that learners who are substantially behind in their progress through school are more likely to drop out of school before completing.

FACTS

QUOTES FROM OUR FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS WITH LEARNERS:

"Teachers call us names. They say we are ancestors."

"When I start holding a book to read I get many thoughts like... I should be in an office working because people my age are far."

"...in my school all over-aged learners were advised by teachers of the possibility of expulsion if they fail."

Impact on teaching

- Research shows that teaching can become more difficult when there is a large spread of ages in a class, as educators have to cater for learners with differences in teaching, emotional and social needs.
- Learners who are older than the average age because they have repeated a number of times, often need additional teaching support and remedial intervention, but in most of the poorly resourced, underperforming schools in South Africa, this support is lacking, adding to the burden of the class teacher.

FACTS

A Grade 9 teacher in the average South African school could be teaching learners from the age of 13 to learners in their early twenties.

DISPELLING MYTHS ABOUT OVER-AGE LEARNERS

- Not all learners who are substantially older than their peers consider their age an important issue in their experience of school. Over-age learners' experiences of being older than most of their classmates differ depending on the attitude of their teacher, their classmates, and household members.
- Our research shows that over-age learners are not necessarily more disruptive to class than appropriately aged children. However, some over-age learners require a slightly different approach to being disciplined, motivated and engaged in class.
- Some teachers and learners consider over-age learners to be an asset to their school. Our research shows that over-age learners can sometimes assist in maintaining discipline in class, and appropriately aged learners spoke of older learners protecting them from abusive or 'overly-strict' teachers.

FACTS

QUOTE FROM OUR FOCUS GROUPS:

- *An appropriately aged learner said: "...It's right to have older pupils especially when electing the monitor. A monitor is someone who should lead us and if you are older and can communicate well with the teachers... they are able to sort out the problems in class."*

WHAT MIGHT HELP OVER-AGE LEARNERS, THEIR TEACHERS AND CLASSMATES IN THEIR EXPERIENCE OF SCHOOL

While there are no simple solutions to preventing learners from experiencing delays to their progress through school, there are 'supporting interventions' that can be provided within the school environment and at home to assist these learners and their teachers.

What can government do?

- Ensure access to a broader range of alternatives to main-stream schooling for learners (e.g. *artisanship, learning-by-doing approaches* etc.).
- Run campaigns to ensure that learners are aware of all of the educational and skills development options, including FET colleges, in their area.
- The extension of counselling services and access to social workers for a broader range of learners is vital – many over-age learners carry a heavy burden of worry about financial and other family stresses.
- Monitor reports of abuse of older learners by teachers and principals.
- Provide guidance to schools on how they can develop over-age learners to become assets for the school, by taking on leadership positions in class, in sports and so on.

What can principals and educators do?

- Treat over-age learners and those learners who have repeated as an asset to the school, not a hindrance. Engage over-age learners creatively, in leadership positions (*in sports and other areas for example*), to increase their sense of engagement in school.
- Ensure that learners and their caregivers are aware of all of the educational and skills development options, including FET colleges, in their area.
- Support learners in developing other areas and talents, apart from academic work. This could include sport and art offered at school, or local youth and community centres. This, in turn, can help build learners' confidence in their school work.

What other initiatives are needed which can be supported by community organisations, NGOs and CSI initiatives?

- **Support to learners:** provide drop-in centres after school to support learners with homework and tutoring programmes.
- **Support to learners:** provide youth with education, training and career advice – alerting youth to all the education and skills development options in their area, including alternatives to mainstream academic schooling, such as FET colleges and technical schools.
- **Support to learners:** provide access to sports, drama, art and other extra-curricula activities.
- **Support to schools:** provide programmes that improve the skills of educators and principals – particularly their ability to diagnose and support learners with learning difficulties.



WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF STAYING IN/RETURNING TO SCHOOL?

- Leaving school before completion reduces opportunities to access better-paid jobs.
- Children who leave school are more likely to engage in high risk social and sexual behaviour such as substance abuse, engagement in crime, or sexual activity which leads to pregnancy (*Palmary 2002, RHRU 2003, Hargreaves et al 2007*).
- Staying in school has a protective effect on youth in South Africa (*Lloyd et al 2008*).



EXAMPLES FROM THE FIELD

Penreach an NGO, offers school development programmes to improve the skills of educators and their schools in Mpumalanga and surrounding areas.

www.penreach.co.za

The **SHAWCO Centre** offers a comprehensive “All Round Tutoring Education programme”, implementing academic, life skills, IT and extra-curricular activities.

www.shawco.org

Equal Education is a movement of learners, parents and teachers working for quality and equality in South African education.

www.equaleducation.org.za

RELATED LINKS

Social Surveys:

www.socialsurveys.co.za

Department of Basic Education:

www.education.gov.za

SPECIAL THANKS

Primary funding for the study was generously provided by **Atlantic Philanthropies**, with additional funding from **Ford Foundation**, **ELMA Foundation** and **Rockefeller Brothers Fund**.

CONTACT US

For more information please contact Social Surveys:

2 Upper Park Drive, Forest Town, Johannesburg 2193

tel +27 11 486 1025

email info@socialsurveys.co.za

www.socialsurveys.co.za



Knowledge is power. But understanding is everything.