

# LEARNER PROGRESS AND ACHIEVEMENT STUDY

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## RESEARCH REPORT 2

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# **LPAS RESEARCH REPORT 2**

## **INTRODUCTION**

This report consists of two separate studies, each of which comprise one of the focal issues undertaken by the Learner Progress and Achievement Study (LPAS) in 1998. Part 1 is a study on overage in Grade 8 at the two secondary schools. The study was undertaken following the observation that vast numbers of student in all the schools were overage. Grade 8 represents the cohort year for 1998, and thus the study was undertaken at this level. The report does however refer to all levels at the schools, and compares the findings to national and provincial data on overage.

Part 2 of this report focuses on school achievement and school choice. The starting point for this piece of research was the need to begin to explain the differential academic achievement of the two secondary schools participating in the LPAS.

These two studies form part of the broader project of the LPAS which aims to identify factors which promote or impede learner progress in disadvantaged urban schools in the Western Cape. The LPAS embarks on approximately two such focal studies annually, as well as continuing with the broader baseline and cohort studies in the four LPAS schools.

PART ONE

OVERAGE: A STUDY OF AGE-GRADE DISTRIBUTION IN  
GRADE 8

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## SUMMARY

- *There are extremely high rates of overageness throughout the schooling system. The majority of learners in Grade 2 are the correct age for their grade, but from this level onwards the incidence of overage increases with the grades, so that in Grade 12 60% of learners nationally are overage. The incidence of overage in the LPAS schools is higher than that of the provincial averages, which suggests that the problem is worse in former DET schools and that this is masked in provincial data.*
- *The focus of this study is on the Grade 8 level, where in the two LPAS secondary schools 60% of learners are overage.*
- *There are differences between the schools in terms of the extent of overage as well as the apparent causes of overage. There are also differences in terms of overage which are related to gender. A greater percentage of boys are overage than girls.*
- *The causal factors contributing to overage are repetition, drop out and drop in, and late starting. Repetition is the greatest factor contributing to learners being overage, and repetition is also related to drop out and late starting.*
- *In both schools, for all learners surveyed, the repetition and dropout rate in Grade 1 is the highest.*
- *Mobility is strongly linked to overage. In our sample, 22% of overage learners have had a disrupted schooling experience due to migration. Of the total number of drop outs recorded, 33% of these were due to movement.*
- *Reasons other than mobility that are significantly disruptive in learners' progress through schooling include health-related factors, economic reasons (i.e. related to poverty) and familial disruptions (such as divorce, deaths, etc.)*
- *There is little correlation between learner progress (and overage) and family structure. The majority of learners live with both parents. Those who live with relatives or in single parent households on average do not progress less smoothly than those who live with both parents.*
- *Our findings show a difference between the schools in terms of the agglomeration of factors resulting in overage. One of the schools has far more overage students and students who are migrants than the other school. The chances that the problem of overage will be exacerbated in the future at the former school is higher than for the latter.*

## INTRODUCTION

Recent reports in the media have indicated an increasing concern over the number of overage learners in the schooling system. In these reports the reason for the vast number of inappropriately aged learners is attributed largely to learners repeating grades. In addition, the constitutional right of all learners to basic education, and post-1994 legislation that encourages learners to return to school, has led to a return to school by out-of-school learners and contributed to a wide range of ages in every grade within the schooling system. Meyer (1997) reports that in 1995 almost 547 000 pupils over the age of 19 were enrolled in schools nationally (representing 4,8% of all African enrolments that year). In 1998 in the Western Cape, close to 8000 learners in school are over the age of 21.

The cost of inefficiency in getting learners timeously through the system, as well as institutional strain resulting from overenrolment are of primary concern to financially strained education departments. Helen Perry, director of information systems for the Department of Education, reported that it takes the average learner approximately fifteen years to reach the Standard 10 level (Pretorius & Khupiso, 1998) and a recent report indicates that 60% of 1998's Standard 10s are overage (*Chalkline*, 10/98). The financial cost of learners repeating is enormous. Crouch (1998) reports that it cost R35 000 more than it should to produce each matriculant (Pretorius & Khupiso, 1998).

Muller (1998) challenges the commonly held assumptions that the two most serious equity problems in schools concern the lack of access to schools (or 'out-of-school youth) and school drop outs. He points to recent research that shows that there is in fact overenrolment of underage learners in Grade 1, and large scale repeating in subsequent grades up to Standard 10. The most pressing issue is thus not getting learners *into* the system, but rather getting them *through* the system.

According to the South African Schools Act, age requirements for different grades may be set by the department, but this has not been done as yet. Politically it is difficult to exclude learners from schools, particularly given that the previous government set age restrictions in order to keep activists out of schools (Metcalf, M. cited in Pretorius & Khupiso, 1998). In addition, in terms of the Constitution, all learners have the right to a basic education. Recently, the Department's response has been to suggest that overage learners be directed to adult learning centres or technical colleges. The feasibility of accommodating overage learners in these centres is questionable, given the relatively small number of centres (particularly in rural areas), the variable fees and the limited accessibility of such centres in terms of travelling cost relative to schools.

Overage is a clear indicator of an inefficient education system. The purpose of this study has been to examine the extent of the problem of overage in the Learner Progress and Achievement Study's (LPAS) two secondary schools, as well as referring to data collected in the two LPAS primary schools. It also aims to examine the causes of overage, whether

it is a result of repetition, late starting or drop out, or to what extent it is a combination of these factors.

In this report we will examine the causes of overage amongst a sample drawn from the Grade 8s in the project's two secondary schools. The reason for focusing on overage in Grade 8 is that Grade 8 constitutes Year One of the LPAS cohort study. The purpose is to examine the progress of the cohort up to the Grade 8 level, and to consider why the majority of the learners appear to be beginning the secondary phase of schooling at a disadvantage (being overage).

The empirical starting point for this study was the observation that a large proportion of the learners in the study's schools were overage. Data collected in terms of the age/grade distribution at all levels in the four schools is represented in Graph 1. The way in which the correct age for each grade level was determined is set out in Table 1.

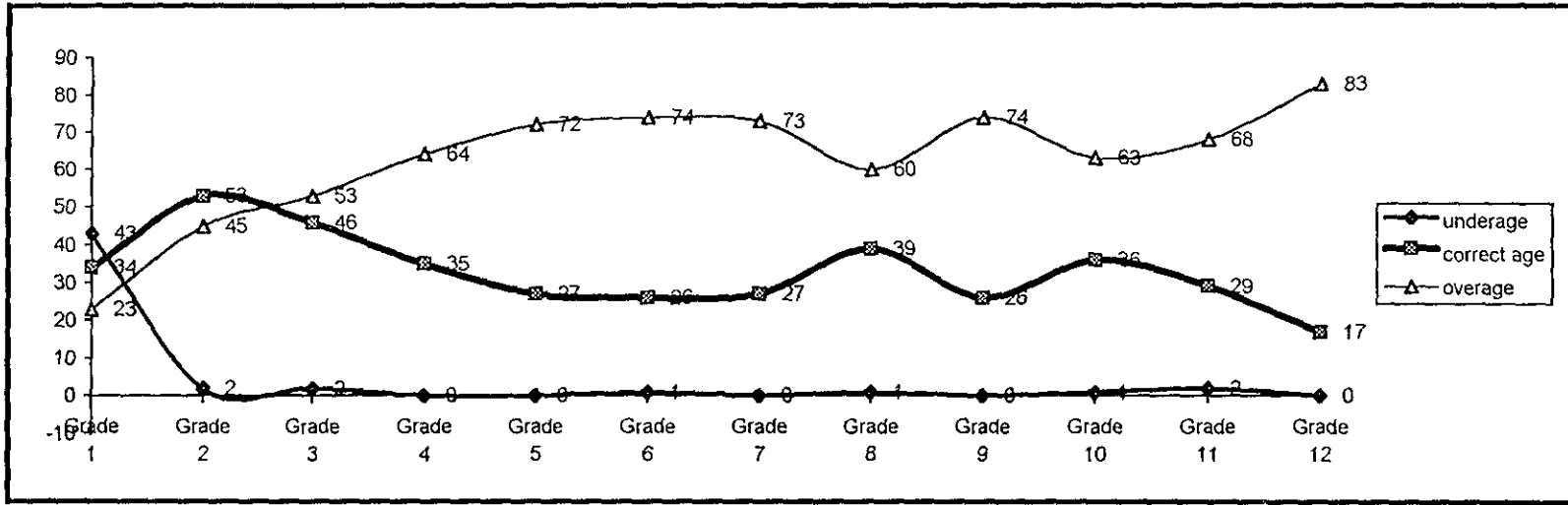
GRADE LEVEL	CORRECT AGE*
Grade 1	7 years
Grade 2	7 or 8 years
Grade 3	8 or 9 years
Grade 4	9 or 10 years
Grade 5	10 or 11 years
Grade 6	11 or 12 years
Grade 7	12 or 13 years
Grade 8	13 or 14 years
Grade 9	14 or 15 years
Grade 10	15 or 16 years
Grade 11	16 or 17 years
Grade 12	17 or 18 years

\* age that the learner turns during the course of the corresponding grade level

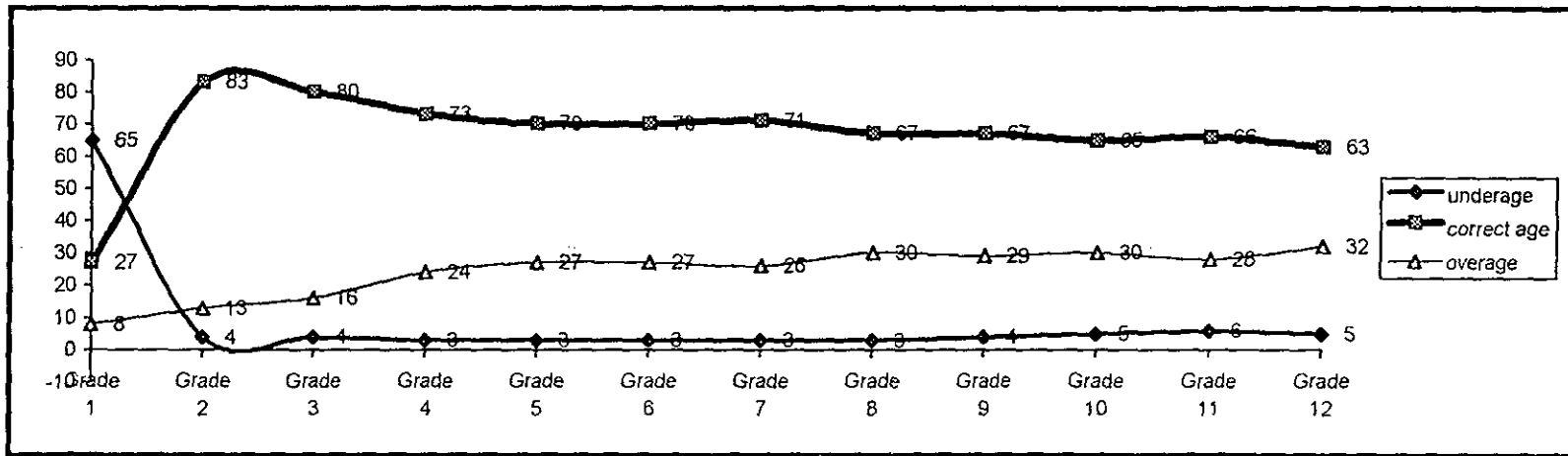
*Table 1: Appropriate age for Grade levels 1 -12 used in this study*

It is evident from the graph that the majority of learners are inappropriately aged for their grade at all grade levels other than Grade 2. The large proportion of underage learners in Grade 1 will form the focus of the LPAS' next report. For the rest of the grades it is evident that the percentage of overage students increases with the grades through the primary and secondary phases (though not uniformly).

Graph 2 represents the age/grade distribution for the Western Cape province. There are similarities between the data represented in this graph, and that collected from the LPAS



Graph 1: Age/Grade distribution School A & B, Grades 1-12, 1998



Graph 2: Age/Grade distribution Western Cape Province, Grades 1-12, 1998

(Source: Western Cape Education Department, EMIS)



schools, although it is clear that the incidence of overage in the LPAS schools is far above the provincial averages. This suggests that the problem of overage is far worse in former DET schools and this is masked in provincial data.

What is similar between the two sets of data is the steady increase of overage learners through the grades. Also the high incidence of underage in Grade 1, and high percentage of appropriately aged learners in Grade 2 is evident from both graphs. What this probably indicates is that learners enrol early in Grade 1, repeat until they are the correct age for Grade 2, and subsequently start repeating again as they progress through the grades. This explanation would be supported by the extremely high repetition rate in Grade 1 indicated both by our own data and by national statistics.

The major difference between the LPAS schools and the provincial numbers is that provincially the majority of learners are the correct age for their grade, whereas in the four schools the majority are overaged.

Following a brief review of the literature around overage, and a discussion of our methodological approach to the study, the analysis will focus primarily on repetition, late starting and drop out (and drop in) as the primary reasons for the large number of overage learners in the sample. The findings of this study will be picked up in the cohort interviews in 1999 in order to extend our understanding of overage in schools, and to explore the causes and implications for learners further.

## A. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Studies in other countries do not make it clear whether overage is due mainly to repetition or late entry to schooling. What has been found however is that timeous enrolment in primary schooling is positively associated with family wealth and parents' schooling, and negatively associated with school costs (Ilon & Moock, 1991). This means that for a variety of reasons it is the poor who are more likely to enrol late, and who repeat grades and drop out. Psacharopoulos and Patrinos (1996) suggest a strong relationship between overage, repetition and drop out.

Several studies have shown that the principal cause of overage is grade repetition and not late entrance (Verhine & de Melo, 1988). Schiefelbein & Wolff (1992) contend that 'age heterogeneity' is a cause of repetition. This is largely because of the effect on learning and teaching methods in the classroom where there are children of various ages in the same grade. "It is difficult for the teacher to generate learning experiences of interest for the whole range of ages". Thus difficulties are created for non-repeaters as well, in that teaching methods change to accommodate children of various ages. Schiefelbein & Wolff (1992) contend that repetition is expected to be greater, the higher the level of age heterogeneity in a given classroom.

Patrinos and Psacharopoulos (1996) conducted an empirical investigation into the causes of over-age in Bolivia and Guatemala. Their study was limited to socio-economic and household factors, and led to the findings that certain populations are more likely to be

affected. Children from poorer households and children of indigenous origins are more likely to be over-aged in primary school. A large difference in age-grade distortion rates was found between different types of schools (private versus public).

Generally the literature on overage learners is sparse, and in particular in South Africa no studies other than media reports were found that addressed the issue. What the literature from other countries does show, and what our study confirms, is that overage is caused mainly by repetition. Also given the contrast between the LPAS schools' data and the provincial data, it would appear that it is children in former DET schools, from predominantly working class families who are more likely to have a disrupted schooling, thus confirming other findings that link socio-economic levels with school progress.

## **B. METHODOLOGY AND DATA COLLECTION 1. *Data collection***

In order to examine the age/grade distribution at the Grade 8 level, as well as causes of overageness, such as late starting, repetition and drop out, a questionnaire was administered to a total of 669 learners from School A and B. The survey was conducted with each of the Grade 8 classes during the Guidance period, for the duration of approximately 50 minutes. The questionnaire was written in both English and Xhosa (English being the medium of instruction at the schools, and Xhosa the home language of the majority of the sample). This was done to enable learners to complete the questionnaire in either language, and to facilitate their comprehension of the information that was required of them. The questionnaire was explained in Xhosa, and two researchers were present to monitor the completion of the questionnaires and to clarify questions. (See Appendix I for Questionnaire)

The purpose of the questionnaire was to track each learner's schooling history, by asking them to complete, for each year from birth, where they were living, what grade they were in, and if they were not in school to provide reasons.

Although the survey was successfully completed by the majority of students, several difficulties were encountered. Question Four and Five on the first page of the questionnaire required that learners provide information concerning their parents' occupation and educational level. The data on parental education has to be treated with caution as some clear overestimation of parental education and occupation was encountered, shown by the occupation of the parents not corresponding with their level of education. For example, a student reported that his father had a Standard 6 and was an engineer. In several other cases mothers were reported to be domestic workers, having had a university education. This is not to assume that the foregoing is not possible, but can perhaps best be explained by the fact that the learners were not afforded the opportunity to give details about the education and occupations of their parents, and thus make it clear what these were.

Problems associated with dealing with very large classes, with many students requiring mediation of the questionnaire also resulted in some questionnaires not being completed satisfactorily. However, these were a small minority of cases.

Finally, in many cases the learners were having to express the fact that they had failed repeatedly, and this was done in the presence of their peers. Cases where students felt uncomfortable and embarrassed were evident. Whether or not this led to cases of false reporting is not clear, but the potential certainly, and understandably, did exist.

The degree of false reporting and confusion were, however, in the minority. This was verified by the consistency between the reporting of factors such as repetition and drop out, and overage. Therefore despite difficulties, we were satisfied with the validity of the data.

## *2. Schools Profile*

The study focuses on the Grade 8 learners in the two LPAS secondary schools. Both schools are co-educational secondary schools, formally administered by the Department of Education and Training (DET). They use English as the medium of instruction and are located on the Cape Flats. The school fees for both schools are R60 a year. Data relating to parental education level and occupation suggest that the schools serve socio-economically similar communities (urban, working class). Despite differences between the schools in terms of achievement, both schools experience a huge problem of overage learners in all grades. However, there are differences between the schools in terms of the kinds of learners that the school draws. These differences will be discussed to a certain extent in this part of the report, and more extensively in Part Two.

For the purposes of this report, the two schools will be referred to as 'School A' and 'School B'.

## *3. Sample description*

For the survey a total of 669 learners from the two schools completed a questionnaire. This number represents 80% of the total number of students in Grade 8 at both schools. Those learners not present on the day the survey was conducted were excluded. Table 1 shows the number of learners surveyed and gender distribution of the sample.

	Males	Females	Total
School A	158	250	408
School B	124	137	261
Total	282	387	669

*Table 2: Gender distribution in School A and School B, Grade 8*

At both schools there are more girls than boys in Grade 8. This is consistent with well-established provincial and national patterns. The difference in the number of boys and girls is much greater at School A, where 61% of the learners are female, than at School B, where there is a more even spread of boys and girls. Why this is the case is not entirely clear. However, it may have something to do with the fact that School A has certain selection strategies in place to draw better achieving learners (see page of Part Two of this report), and since girls are shown to do better at school, School A may attract more girls than boys.

*a) Family composition*

For the entire sample, the majority of learners (57%) live with both parents. 31 % live only with their mother, and very few students live solely with their fathers, relatives and siblings (3%). The mother is in most cases also the learners' primary caregiver. However, as shown in previous research done within LPAS, within this context there appears to be little connection between learner progress (or learners being overage) and family composition. In other words, learners who live with both parents do not progress through the schooling system more smoothly than those who live with relatives, or in a single parent household. The nature of familial support within this context must be considered, where often parents do not take full responsibility for children, but are supported by the extended family network.

*b) Parental Education*

The two schools have student populations which can broadly be defined as working class, based on an analysis of parental education level and occupation. Information on a total of 1258 parents (mothers and fathers) was collected by student reporting. The education level of 329 (25%) of the parents was unknown to learners. Learners more frequently did not know what schooling their fathers had completed than their mothers, and paternal absence (due to death, divorce, separation, etc.) was frequently reported. The table below shows the data available for the remaining 75% of learners' parents and indicates their level of education.

Level of education	% of parents
No schooling	2%
Primary	15%
Grade 8	15%
Grades 9 - 11	40%
Grade 12	19%
College	4%
University	5%

*Table 3: Parental education level for 75% of total sample*

Most parents received some secondary education (55%), and few learners reported that their parents had received no education at all (2%). 19% of parents reached the Standard 10 level (Grade 12) although it is not clear whether they completed Standard 10 or not. Differences do exist between the two schools, and the educational level of parents at School A is higher than that of School B. Table 4 shows the differences between the parental education levels at the two schools.

	School A	School B
No schooling	2%	3%
Primary	10%	21%
Grade 8	12%	20%
Grades 9 - 11	39%	43%
Grade 12	23%	10%
College	6%	2%
University	8%	1%

*Table 4: Parental education level Schools A & B*

At School B the number of parents having not progressed beyond the Grade 8 level is 44%, as opposed to 24% at School A. 14% of parents at School A were reported to have gained some tertiary education, compared with 3% at School B. The general level of education of parents of learners at School A appears to be substantially higher than that of School B. Since the number of overage learners is lower at School A, this data would suggest a possible connection between school progress and parental education level. To investigate this further, the parental education level of overage learners was compared with that of correct age learners (Table 5).

	Parents of overage learners	parents of correct age learners
No schooling	3%	1%
Primary	16%	13%
Grade 8	17%	10%
Grades 9 - 11	42%	37%
Grade 12	15%	24%
College	3%	7%
University	4%	8%

*Table 5: Parental education level of overage & correct age learners, Schools A & B*

Of the parents of correct age learners, 39% attained a Standard 10 or some tertiary education, compared with 22% of overaged learners' parents. 36% of parents of overaged learners did not progress beyond the Grade 8 level, as opposed to 24% of correct aged learners. Thus there appears to be some connection between parental education levels and learner progress. It is not clear however in what ways parents education impacts on the progress of learners in this context, and until this is examined further we have to assume that parents who have had a significant amount of education can offer their children more support, in terms of academic support, the cultural capital they have to offer their children and the importance they place on education. Parents with higher education levels may also be in a position to offer more material support. These are, however, assumptions and the connection between parental education and learner achievement in a South African context needs to be investigated further.

*c) Parental occupation*

Three categories of occupation that the learners' parents belong to were identified. These are *skilled non-manual* such as teachers and nurses, *skilled manual* such as carpenters and tailors and *semi-skilled manual* which includes domestic work and other forms of manual labour.

Skilled non-manual	9%
Skilled manual	2%
Semi skilled manual	41%
Unemployed	18%
Unknown	25%

*Table 6: Parental occupation*

Most parents do semi-skilled manual work, the most common occupation of parents being domestic labour (of the total number of parents, 14% are engaged in domestic labour). It is interesting to note that the data collected here suggests a wider lack of skills training as the survey shows that very few parents do skilled manual work (2%). This raises questions around the availability of vocational training in the education system. 18% of parents are unemployed and this has implications for the quality of work-related input parents are able to give to their children, not to mention the socio-economic implications.

Based on parental educational level and occupation, it can be said that the large majority of learners in the sample come from working class homes, often lacking the resources to support smooth progress through the schooling system.

## 1. Age

There is a high incidence of overage in Grade 8 in Schools A and B. The number of overage learners in both schools is greater than the number of appropriately aged learners.

	Number correct age	% correct age	Number overage	% overage
School A	188	46%	215	53%
School B	76	29%	185	71%
<b>TOTAL</b>	264	40%	400	60%

*Table 7: Age- grade distribution, Grade 8 Schools A & B*

The incidence of overage at School B is, however, more severe than at School A. 71 % of the learners in Grade 8 at School B are overage, and at School A, 53% are overage. Recent media reports have indicated that nationally only 50% of Grade 8s are the appropriate age for their grade (Pretorius & Khupiso, 1998).

For our total sample the percentage of overage learners (60%) is well above this national average. The following gives an indication of the extent of overageness of the sample:

- 400 (or 60% of) learners in the sample are not appropriately aged for their grade
- 28% of learners are one year overage
- 25% of learners are two - three years overage
- 7% of learners are four - nine years overage
- 16% of learners in the sample will turn 17 or older in their grade 8 year

It is also interesting to note the percentage of girls and boys who are overage.

	% Female overage	% Male overage
School A	48%	59%
School B	62%	81%

*Table 8: Overage by gender, Schools A & B*

In both schools the percentage of boys who are overage is greater than that of girls. In School B 81 % of the boys are overage, and this may partly be explained by the fact that at the school a large number of learners started and did most of their schooling in the Eastern Cape (see section on movement, page 18) and the high number of overage boys may be due to the fact that child labour, late starting and familial disruptions are more prevalent in this region and appear to affect boys more than girls. This will be discussed further below.

## 2. Causes of overage

Our findings show that overage in the sample is a result of late start, repetition or dropout, or a combination of these. 28% of the total sample progressed smoothly through their schooling, without repeating, starting late or dropping out. Of the remaining 72%, one or a combination of these factors led to overage. In Table 9 the incidents (late start, repetition and drop out) contributing to overage are separated out and represented as a percentage of the total number of incidents leading to overage amongst learners. The table shows the extent to which these factors contributed to learners being overage (i. e. single repetition accounts for 31% of the total number of factors contributing to overageness).

Causes of overage	% of total incidents
Single repetition	31%
Multiple repetition	28%
Drop out	22%
Late start	19%

*Table 9: Causes accounting for overage (School A & B) represented as a percentage of the total number of incidents leading to overage.*

(Note: 'Drop out' in the context of this report refers to those learners who had dropped out of school for a period of time, and then re-entered the schooling system. 'Drop out' therefore actually refers to 'drop out - drop in')

### a) Late start

Of the entire sample 20% of the learners started school late. In most cases it is a combination of starting school late and repeating or dropping out for a period that accounts for overageness. It is not always clear why learners started school late, although several mentioned economic reasons, movement and child labour. Several learners also reported having been sent away from school when they were due to start Grade 1 as their "hand did not touch the ear", referring to the practice of assessing a child's physical development and correct age by letting them attempt to reach over their head to their left ear with their right hand. It appears that several learners were not permitted either by a school or parent to begin school because they were (physically) "too small", despite being the correct school starting age. Many of the learners surveyed are migrants from the Eastern Cape. The issue of migrancy will be dealt with in detail below. It is clear, however, that in the rural areas where these children did the greater part of their schooling, age is often not the primary criterion for deciding when a child commences school. Child labour ("I was looking after cattle" is a frequent reason quoted) plays a substantial part in the late-starting of several learners in this context. Thus "the children of migrants may tend to have a wider range of ages for a particular grade, because pressures of the agricultural cycle and child minding interrupt school attendance and careers" (Wenman, cited in Kruss & Paterson, 1998).



The distance of schools from the learners' homes also plays a role in causing learners to start school late:

"I was told not to go to school because the schools were far away"

"Schools were too far from our home in the rural areas so only the older ones went to school"

Reasons relating to learners home circumstances (often connected to economic conditions in the home) are also frequently cited as a cause for starting school late:

"I stayed with my grandparents and they did not have money to send me to school" "My grandmother was blind and I had to look after her"

"My parents were fighting"

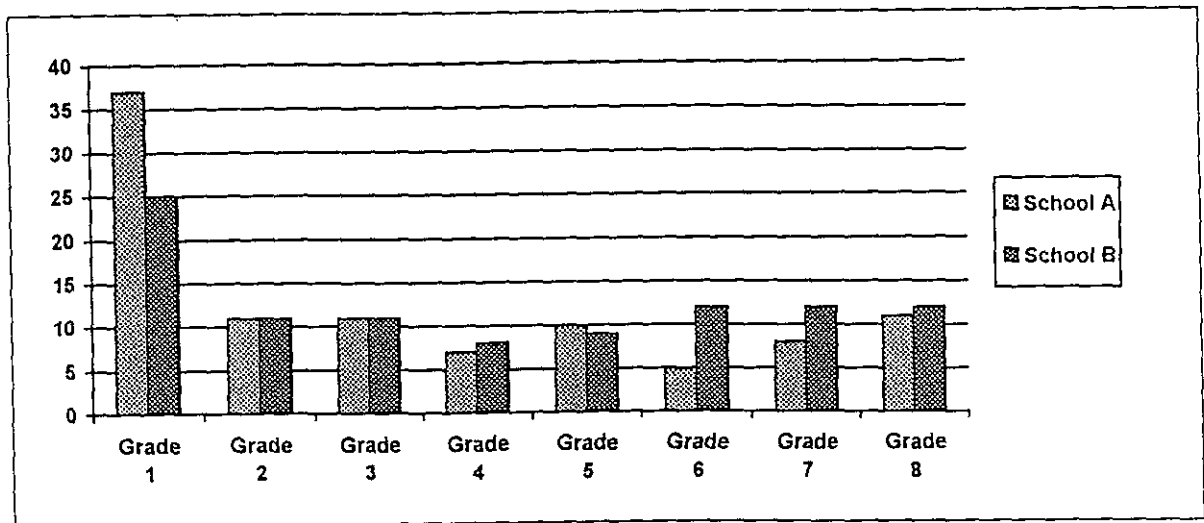
#### b) Repetition

A high rate of repetition is one of the most serious problems facing the schooling system nationally. It is a strong indicator of inefficiency, and calls into question the quality of teaching and learning in schools. It was found in the survey that the majority of learners (58%) had repeated at least one grade in their schooling careers thus far.

In the analysis of the data two forms of repetition were identified, *single repetition* and *multiple repetition*. Multiple repetition refers to repetition of one grade a number of times or repetition of different grades. Single repetition refers to a learner who has failed and repeated a grade once. The following gives an indication of the extent of repetition *including* single repetition and drop out and multiple repetition and drop out in the sample:

- 31% of learners repeated a single grade
- 7% of learners repeated once and dropped out
- 30% of learners repeated two or more grades
- 12% of learners have repeated two or more years and dropped out.

The graph below indicates the repetition rate at the different levels. At both schools, for all learners, the repetition rate is highest at the Grade 1 level. The fact that this is highest in Grade 1 is consistent with national statistics reported in the media that estimate 67% of Grade 1 s repeat the year (Lund & Damon, 1998), although this represents an estimate and the actual figure is unknown. Also significant are the Grade 7 and Grade 8 levels, indicating difficulties in making the transition between primary and secondary schooling.



Graph 3: Repetition rate, Grade 1 - 8

### c) Drop out

Drop out is a major factor contributing to overage. Of the entire sample, 164 (25%) learners had dropped out at some stage and dropped in again. However, as mentioned above a combination of drop out and late start or repetition better explains overage. Only small numbers of learners in both schools, 1% in School A and 3% in School B, are overage due to drop out alone. Repetition, particularly multiple repetition in combination with drop out, is a major cause of overage in the sample. It is also interesting to note the length of time that the drop outs have dropped out for. The following indicates the percentage of drop outs that dropped out for different lengths of time:

56% of learners who dropped out, dropped out for half a year. 24% of learners who dropped out, dropped out for one year. 10% of learners who dropped out, dropped out for 2 years. 10% of learners who dropped out, dropped out for 3-8 years.

Once again it should be noted that the extent of drop out in School B was greater than that of School A. In School B 32% of the total sample had dropped out, whereas at School A 24% of the learners had dropped out for a period.

Table 10 shows reasons given by learners for drop out. Most of the reasons given by students are associated with out-of-school factors, such as movement, illness, house burning, etc. Other reasons such as language issues and schools being full also contributed to drop out. The primary causes of drop out as reported by learners are illness and movement (or migration).

Reason For Drop Out	No. of learners
Illness	61
Movement	59
Familial disruption	20
Economic	16
Attributed to personal failure	14
Child labour	7
Other	23

*Table 10: Reasons given for drop out*

Unlike repetition, which is high at certain grade levels, the fact that there is a relatively even spread across the grade levels of drop out suggests that drop out has less to do with school-specific factors than with out-of-school factors. Also the reasons given by learners for drop out rarely refer to school specific issues. At the Grade 1 level, however, it is suggested in the literature, and argued by Lund (1998) that there is a strong connection between repetition and drop out. National statistics show that there is both a high repetition rate (67%) and high drop out rate (25%) at this level. The data collected for this study confirms this connection between multiple repetition and drop out in Grade 1. Both the repetition and drop out rate was the highest at this level. At other schooling levels, a pattern of multiple repetition and subsequent drop out was also noted in a few cases.

*d) Late start, repetition, drop out and gender*

Data reflected in Table 11 shows that a greater proportion of boys drop out, repeat and start late than girls. This corresponds to a greater number of boys being overage (see Table 8).

	Drop out		Late start		Repetition	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
<b>School A</b>	21%	17%	19%	18%	68%	56%
<b>School B</b>	40%	23%	28%	22%	68%	53%

*Table 11: Percentage of males and females in Schools A & B who dropped out, started late and repeated*

Table 11 shows the percentage of boys and girls who dropped out, repeated and started late in both schools. The percentage of girls and boys who repeated is very high, though greater for boys. The percentage of boys who dropped out in School B is also extremely high (40%), The incidence of drop out, late start and repetition is far greater in School B than in School A, corresponding to the greater number of overage learners in the former.

For all three causes of overage the percentage of boys is greater than that of girls. Thus it is clear that not only are there fewer boys in schools, but that they have more difficulty progressing through the system than girls. The data also highlights the significant difference between the schools, particularly in terms of the number of learners who dropped out and started late. Again this could probably be largely explained in terms of movement, which will be addressed in the following section.

### 3. *Movement*

Since 1989 vast numbers of people have been moving from the Eastern Cape to Cape Town in search of better employment and educational opportunities (Mazur & Qangule, 1995). Because of familial and social networks existing in both places, there appears to be frequent movement between the two provinces, in order to fulfil familial obligations, or to allow for a flexible child-caring relationship amongst members of a family. In other words, children of migrants may frequently move between different households across the two provinces, depending on which is better positioned to support the child. The sporadic and intermittent movement of parents and children means that many of these children can "never expect that those who care for them, and who support them materially and emotionally, would do so regularly and reliably over time or would consistently comprise the same set of individuals" (Spiegel & Mehlwana, 1997:21). The disruption of close relationships and of school experiences is one that is commonly cited by students in the sample as a cause for late start, drop out and repetition:

"Because my Grandmother took me to Transkei"

° *I* came from Ciskei and arrived in the middle of the year in Cape Town, so *I* couldn't find a school"

"I had to go to my Uncle so that he could send me to school" "My Mother wanted my schooling in Cape Town"

The effects of migrancy on the schooling of a large number of learners in the LPAS schools has been referred to in the previous LPAS report and is dealt with in some detail in Part Two of this report. The effect of migrancy in the disruption of schooling is substantial amongst the learners surveyed for this study. The implications of households that are "stretched" across two provinces are that students often have to fulfil familial obligations in two places, and this causes disruption. A common scenario, and one outlined by several students, is having to go back to the Eastern Cape to look after grandparents, or to attend funerals. Once they are there, they are told to wait until the death ritual is done. These children are often required to remain for a long period of time and consequently become drop outs. If they return, having missed a lot of school, they become repeaters. Several learners in the sample who came from the Eastern Cape reported that they dropped out of school because when they arrived in the Western Cape, schools were full.

Table 12 below shows the birthplace of the learners in School and School B. Although it cannot be assumed that a learner born in the Western Cape does not move between provinces, the data does indicate that the majority of learners in School B were born in the Eastern Cape and it can be assumed that they are more susceptible to the effects of migration between provinces than those learners who have had a more stable residence in the Western Cape.

	Western Cape	Eastern Cape	Gauteng	Kwazulu - Natal	Free State	Northern Cape
School A	232	140	27	4	2	3
School B	114	138	5	2	2	
Total	346	278	32	6	4	3

Table 12: Province of birth of learners, School A & B

Of the total 669 learners in the survey, 286 (43%) moved between the Eastern Cape and the Western Cape in the course of their schooling.. A much greater number of learners at School B moved than those at School A: 31% of the learners at School A, and 61% of the learners at School B moved after they had commenced their schooling. In addition, Table 13 shows that a greater proportion of boys than girls moved at both schools.

	% of males who moved	% of females who moved
School A	33%	28%
School B	65%	56%

Table 13: Percentage of learners who moved according to gender

The question then arises as to what effect movement had on learners. Table 14 shows the percentage of learners who moved who were adversely affected by movement, i.e. how many learners' had their schooling disrupted by movement, leading to the repetition of grades, dropping out or starting late. The percentage of those who moved but progressed smoothly through their schooling is also shown.

	Affected by movement	Not affected by movement
School A	52%	48%
School B	51%	49%
Total*	51%	49%

\*100% equals the number of learners who moved between provinces in the course of their schooling

Table 14: Percentage of learners who moved, whose movement was/wasn't associated with late start, repetition or drop out

From the above table it can be seen that approximately half the learners who moved were adversely affected by that movement in terms of its impact on their schooling. In other words, half of those learners who moved from one province to another, repeated a year of schooling following the move, dropped out or started late. Table 15 shows, however, that in both schools boys are far more adversely affected by movement than girls.

	<b>Males affected by movement</b>	<b>Females affected by movement</b>
<b>School A</b>	61%	46%
<b>School B</b>	65%	36%
<b>Total</b>	64%	42%

*Table 15: Percentage of learners who moved, whose movement was associated with late start, repetition or drop out, by school and gender*

To summarize, more boys move than girls, and boys are more adversely affected by movement. Given that half of the learners that moved did not appear to be adversely affected by the movement, there are clearly specific problems associated with migrancy that affect some learners more adversely than others. As has been stated before in LPAS reports, it is very seldom that a single factor can explain a learner's difficulty or success in progressing through their schooling. Movement however, is shown to play a significant disruptive role in many of the lives of the learners, particularly those at School B.

Some of the specific problems associated with migrancy have been referred to above, but also include gaining access to a different curriculum, language issues, as well as a need for many former Eastern Cape students to "catch up" coming as they do from largely rural schooling, to an urban, better resourced context. The data provided above shows that some learners are affected by migration, while for others movement does not represent a disruption to schooling. This would depend on the time of migration, as well as the circumstances under which the learner migrates, as well as a consideration of the familial ties that learners have in different provinces causing them to move frequently. It would also depend on the quality of schooling that the learner has received in the Eastern Cape, given that schools there, as in all provinces, differ in teaching and learning practices and quality.

## CONCLUSION

This study has shown that a vast number of learners in the LPAS schools are overage. Looking at provincial and national data we have indicated that this is a system-wide problem, affecting all levels of the schooling system.

Overage is the result of three factors, and usually a combination of these: repetition, drop out - drop in and late start. The study has shown that the primary cause of overage is due to learners repeating grades. The most problematic year in terms of the factors leading to overage (drop out late start and repetition) is Grade 1. Grade 7 and Grade 8 also have high rates of repetition and drop out and this indicates that the institutional change from primary to secondary schooling needs to be facilitated more adequately.

It was also found in our sample, and particularly in School A, that migration is a major source of disruption in learners schooling, resulting in late starting, dropping out and repetition.

There are differences between the schools in the number of overage learners as well as the factors that have caused overage. In School A overage is largely a result of repetition, whereas in School B dropping out and starting late play a *significant* role in leading to learners being overage. The incidence of overage in School B is also much higher than that of School A. The differences between the two schools will be elucidated in further in Part Two of this report.

There are also gender differences in terms of overage. More boys are overage, and this was found to be often linked with movement. Girls are also subject to movement, but are less adversely affected by it than boys. There are more girls in both the schools and girls tend to progress through their schooling more smoothly than boys.

Although the out-of-school factors impacting on learners schooling were more salient in this study than in-school factors, the quality of teaching and learning, and learner support, that these learners have experienced has undoubtedly contributed to many of them having spent more time in school than they should have. These in-school factors will be examined further in 1999 in the LPAS school culture and management focal study, as well as within the cohort interviews. It is also intended that this work be taken further in an examination of the institutional implications (for schools) and the pedagogical implications (for teachers and learners) of a large number of overage learners in the schools.

The high incidence of overage in schools is an issue which needs to be addressed seriously, not only because of the implications it has for schools in terms of overenrolment and curriculum and school management issues, but also because it indicates that the system is inefficient. This inefficiency is not only related to costs to the state, but also to the costs of individual learners who are not able to progress smoothly through the system in a period of twelve years.

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## APPENDIX 1

Please answer the following questions, either in English or in Xhosa:

**Full name**

*Igama elipheleleyo*

**Male/Female**

*isini:*

**Date of Birth**

*Umhla wokuzalwa:*

**Age**

*Ubudala:*

**Grade**

*Ibanga:*

**Home address**

*Idilesi yasekhaya:*

**Home Language**

*Ulwimi lwasekhaya*

**1. Name all the people that you live with (e.g. mother, father, sister, cousin, etc.)**

*Bhala bonke abantu ohlala nabo (Umzekelo. umama, utata, usisi, umzala, umntwana kasisi)*

**2. Who is the main person who looks after you?**

*Ngubani oyena mntu ukukhathaleleyo?*

**3. Who chose this school?**

*Ngubani owakhetha esi sikolo?*

**4. Why was this school chosen?**

*Kutheni kwakhethwa esi sikolo nje?*

**5. Do you have any children?**

*Unabo abantwana?*

**6. What education does your mother and father have?**

*Banemfundo engakanani umama notata wakho?*

**Mother**

*uMama*

No school	
Primary only	
Std 6	
Std 7	
Std 8	
Std 9	
Std 10	
College	
University	
I don't know	

**Father**

*uTata*

No school	
Primary only	
Std 6	
Std 7	
Std 8	
Std 9	
Std 10	
College	
University	
I don't know	

**7. What job do your mother and father do?**

*Benza umsebenzi onjani umama notata wakho?*

**uMama** \_\_\_\_\_

**uTata** \_\_\_\_\_

Fill in the following table, beginning with the year of your birth and ending with 1998/Gcwalisa le tafle, uqale ngomhla wokuzalwa kwakho uphele ngo 1998

year/ Unyaka	Where were you living? Wawuhlala phi?	Were you in school? Wawusesikolw eni? Ewe/Hayi	If yes, in what grade? Ukuba uthi ewe, kweliphi ibanga?	If no, why were you not in school? Ukuba uthi hayi, kwakutheni ungabikho esikolweni?
1976				
1977				
1978				
1979				
1980				
1981				
1982				
1983				
1984				
1985				
1986				

year/ <i>Unyaka</i>	Where were you living? <i>Wawuhlala phi?</i>	Were you in school? <i>Wawusesikolw eni? Ewe/Hayi</i>	If yes, in what grade? <i>Ukuba uthi ewe, kweliphi ibanga?</i>	If no, why were you not in school? <i>Ukuba uthi hayi, kwakutheni ungabikho esikolweni?</i>
1987				
1988				
1989				
1990				
1991				
1992				
1993				
1994				
1995				
1996				
1997				
1998				

PART TWO

FOR BETTER OR WORSE - STANDARD TEN RESULTS AS PUBLIC MARKERS OF  
SCHOOL SUCCESS

*Ursula Kate Hoadley*

## Introduction

Each year a great deal of media attention is focused on the outcomes of the Standard 10 examinations, and these become for the public a way of gauging the success of the country's education system. At the regional and district levels schools are assessed in their educational communities in terms of their results, and certain schools are hailed as successes and others not. Questions arise around what Standard 10 results actually indicate about a school in terms of its academic performance. This report will argue that to an extent, and in a specific context, a school's success is in part determined by the composition of its student population, and its possibilities for future success are determined by its Standard 10 results acting as public markers of its success, and thereby enabling it to attract a student population more likely to succeed. Thus how students choose schools in a specific context will be examined in some detail. Furthermore, the fact that students compete for certain schools, allowing those schools in turn to select students in various ways, will also be examined. The study will be related to broader debates in the school choice literature, and the relevance of issues raised here will be discussed in relation to the South African context. Two unequally performing secondary schools within the same locality will be used as case studies in developing the argument.

## School Choice Debates

There is a trend internationally, and more recently and in a different way in South Africa, towards education as an object of consumption, or the "marketization of education". This has implications in terms of mobility as well as a more pro-active selective process by both students (and or parents) and schools. The restructuring of education along the lines of a free market has led, particularly in Britain and the US, to the implementation of a number of school choice policies.

These policies have resulted in a great deal of debate around the results and effects of school choice, as to whether it achieves what it sets out to achieve, or in fact accomplishes the opposite. The primary aim of school choice policies is to bring about reform in education by developing market mechanisms, which are believed to foster education excellence over the long term (Dale, 1997:452). The recent literature has focused on the cultural, political and symbolic components and implications of school choice programmes (Archibald, 1991; Angus, 1992; Cookson; 1992; Edwards & Whitty, 1992; Bowe *et al*, 1994). Proponents of school choice claim that an education system organised around free choice will enhance competition amongst schools and in turn promote educational performance. Opponents of school choice fear the possible effects on social inequality (Astin, 1993; Lee, 1993) maintaining that it will produce elitism and segregation and potentially entrench class inequalities (Gerwitz *et al*, 1995). Furthermore that it is middle class parents that are likely to exercise choice opportunities that are available, and that those previously disadvantaged in the school system are unlikely to benefit within the new educational market.

## School Choice in South Africa

In order to discuss the specific realisations school choice issues have in South Africa, it is necessary to briefly sketch the broad changes in the composition of schools since the creation of a single, unified education system. Following the dissolving of the seventeen separate, and racially defined, education departments, a dual system of schooling has been emerging within the new educational dispensation in South Africa. Compounded by the establishment of now defunct Model C schools (semi-privatized state schools), and though different in form to apartheid education, the new system can be broadly delineated in terms of a privileged schooling sector serving a minority, and an under-resourced, largely poor quality, public system serving the majority (Fataar, 1997:72). The former sector comprises independent schools and privileged state schools. These state schools are privileged by virtue of the fact that state schools are able to set their own fees; these fees are determined largely by the fee paying potential of the school community and the school is able to determine the composition of the school community by defining the school's feeder area. Due to the legacy of the apartheid Group Areas legislation the two schooling sectors are spatially defined, and these privileged state schools are located in middle-class, predominantly white suburbs. The under-resourced public schools, which constitute the vast majority of schools, are largely located in working class areas, and serve a predominantly black student population.

These two sectors are thus delineated largely in terms of class. The dramatic changes in the composition of some schools since the opening up of the school system can broadly be described as follows. Middle class black and white students have moved to independent schools and privileged state schools, freeing up spaces in 'boundary schools' (former Model C schools on the borders of historical group areas), which have been taken up largely by middle and lower middle class black, coloured and Indian students. The result has been a skewing of the class composition of the public school sector, where the majority of students are from working class backgrounds. The fact that many of the children of politicians and the middle and professional classes are not in the under-resourced public system should also not be overlooked in terms of the effect it has had on the quality of teaching and learning in this largely impoverished sector, as well as their capacity to lobby and impact on education policy and delivery.

The nature of school choice has also changed with the new patterns in the composition of the schooling system. In the past school choice had very specific implications in terms of race. Broadly, white students attended private or local state schools which were of a generally good quality. The move now has been towards the selection of schools that are independent or privileged state schools, and the 'local' is not a primary consideration. In the case of black students, the issue of school choice in the past was far more complicated, and was connected to demographic patterns, as well as patterns of mobility. Where there was a predominance of migrant labour amongst this sector of the population, the choice was largely between sending students to rural or urban schools, i.e. where the parent or relative worked (urban) or where the family was based (rural, generally 'bantustan'). The choice usually centred around issues of cost and social support, as well as political

stability, where generally urban schools were sites of political activity, and schooling in a rural setting was construed as being less disrupted and more stable.

This logic has shifted, and with the present composition and distribution of schools different considerations around the ways in which school choice is realized have arisen. Due to the spatially organized nature of schooling, school choice, particularly in the Western Cape case (where schools are permitted to implement zoning policies), has largely to do with locality, and whether students are economically in a position to make choices beyond the borders of their locality. In the South African context choice opportunities are not evenly distributed socially, and the higher the socio-economic level of the individual the greater the choice opportunities. This is an indication as well as a result of the increasing commodification of education; i.e. more money buys a better education.

Compounding the issue of locality, issues of class and language also play a role in parents and students selecting schools within close proximity to their homes and within their social community, as "to decode a complex deregulated admissions system ... demands particular skills, knowledge and confidence" (Gerwitz *et al*, 1997:161). In addition resources and stamina are needed to appeal against decisions made by schools regarding admissions.

In the South African context school choice is bound up with class (and race) and locality, and is largely informed by the material environments which constitute and constrain the lives and opportunities of families.

### Theorizing School Choice

In theorizing the process of choice, much of the British and American literature focuses on comparing middle class educational actors with those of the working class. Reay and Ball (1997) argue that educational choice is typically theorized in terms of the middle class norm which positions working class parents as "deficit models". Gerwitz *et al* (1997) construct a typology of choosers in terms of their relationship to and functioning within the educational market. Their analysis shows how school choice is directly and powerfully related to social class.

Three ideal types of choosers are explained: the skilled/privileged choosers (broadly middle class), the semi-skilled choosers (broadly working class, less capable of making informed choices than the skilled), and the 'disconnected' (though not 'disinterested', working class). The disconnected do not 'play the market', i.e. they are disconnected from it. The authors assert that for the 'disconnected' "the idea of examining a wide range of schools is not something which enters their frame of thinking" (1997:45), and choice is primarily determined by considerations around distance, safety, convenience and locality. Also choice is informed by local social networks, rather than "the individuality of the child-matching strategies" of the skilled choosers, who have the capacity to decode school systems and organisations and discriminate between individual schools in terms of their policies and practices (1997:25).

In their analysis of parental choice of schools, the authors draw extensively on Bourdieu, and his notion of 'habitus' - "the dispositions of agents, their habitus, i.e. the mental structures through which they apprehend the social world, are essentially the product of the internalization of that world" (Bourdieu, 1990:130) - and the concept of cultural capital, which is used in the decoding of schools and the interpretation of information in making educational choices. Hatcher (1998:10) explains how parental cultural capital enhances success probability of children through two mechanisms. One is knowledge about the education system which facilitates strategic behaviour. Middle class parents know better how to navigate the system (including knowing that the level of ability needed to succeed in higher education is quite limited, and being able to make more accurate appraisal of their children's potential). The second mechanism is the more effective help that middle-class parents are able to give with their children's school work. In addition the social networks among higher-class children and parents are more effective in facilitating diffusion processes of information about education and destinations, practical help and support and shared aspirations for higher education. Across the social classes that are represented by the typologies presented by Gerwitz et al, the possession of particular cultural capacities are unevenly distributed.

Gerwitz et al's analysis is useful in this study in illuminating how some are better positioned to interact with the schooling system in making choices than others, and secondly how this positioning is related to class and the possession of cultural capital. In response to cultural explanations Hatcher (1997) introduces Rational Action Theory (or RAT) in explaining school choice. RAT provides an added dimension to culturalist explanations of the effects of social class on educational choices. In terms of RAT, "decisions about educational progression are made on the basis of calculations of costs, benefits and probabilities of success of various options" (Hatcher, 1997:11). Class differences are explained in terms of the "relative cost-benefit balances for different classes" and in terms of differing class "goals" which can be defined in economic terms, in terms of employment status and income. Proponents of RAT generally do not deny that class cultures exist, but argue that they do not inform decision-making independently of rational utilitarian considerations (Goldthorpe, 1996:487). Hatcher contends that in developing a theory of agency in examining school choice, the strengths of the culturalist paradigm would need to be retained while creating a space within it for rational strategic decision-making (grounded in RAT) (1997:21).



## The Case Studies

In this report I will focus on how school choice is realized within the under-resourced public sector of South African schooling outlined above. Within this sector there is a scarcity of 'good schools' and the establishment of a hierarchical intra-school stratification. This hierarchizing can be explained in terms of the school's prestige within its educational community. Tatar (1995) defines prestige as "that special quality which endows select schools with an aura of distinction" (pg. 93). Further, Yair (1996) explains how a school's prestige impacts on its potential of attracting a "best-fitting" student body and that "in free markets schools attempt to select a student body that will enhance the reputation of the school while minimizing organizational distractions" (Yair, 456). This paper will argue, in reference to the case studies presented, that it is through their achievement in the Standard 10 examinations that prestige is conveyed upon a school, and thus either constrains or enhances its choice in terms of constituting the "best-fitting" student body for the school. It is necessary that achievement and choice in terms of educational decisions are examined within the structural and class-related constraints of this group. These choice processes will also be discussed in the light of the outlined theoretical positions in the school choice literature, and in terms of the notion of prestige.

### *The schools*

Two unequally performing urban secondary schools situated on the Cape Flats and located within the same district will be used as case studies. The distance between the two schools is approximately four kilometres and the schools serve socio-economically similar communities of several shack settlements and formalized housing settlements in the surrounding area. The student populations at both schools come from predominantly working class families. Both schools are co-educational secondary schools, formally administered by the Department of Education and Training (DET). The official medium of instruction at the schools is English. The school fees for both schools are R60 a year. In many ways the constraints facing the two schools are similar, yet there are important differences, one of the most significant being their differential academic performance. In the 1997 Matriculation examinations one of the schools achieved an 86% pass rate, and at the other only 27% of the Standard 10's passed. The achievement record of the schools from 1995 to 1997 is shown in Table 1 below.

(For the purposes of this paper the better achieving school will be referred to as 'School A' and the less achieving school as 'School B')

	1995 pass rate	1995 exemption rate	1996 pass rate	1996 exemption rate	1997 pass rate	1997 exemption rate
School A	*	*	*	*	86.6%	6.8%
School B	14.9%	0.005%	10.1%	0.09%	26.6%	2.5%

\*Information will be provided as soon as data becomes available

*Table 1: Achievement record in the Matriculation examination for School A & B (1995-7)*

Student numbers in both schools decrease as the grades increase. although not uniformly (Table 2). The high numbers at the Grade 10 level could be attributed to the large influx of migrants from the Eastern Cape (where many of the schools only go up to Grade 9) in combination with a high failure and repetition rate at this level.

Grade	School A	School B
Grade 8	364	265
Grade 9	257	215
Grade 10	333	262
Grade 11	243	218
Grade 12	207	150
<b>Total</b>	<b>1401</b>	<b>1110</b>

*Table 2: Students numbers by grade at School A & School B*

	Number of staff	Average number of years experience	Number of deputy principals	Number of HODs
School A	51	11.59	2	9
School B	41	4.7	2	5

*Table 3: Staffing at School A and School B*

From Table 3 it can be seen that School A has a more extensive management structure than School B, as well as a more experienced teaching staff. The qualification levels of the management and teaching staff at the two schools is similar.

There are some differences between the schools in terms of human and physical resources, however, these will not be dealt with here. The focus is rather on how the student population profile in terms of socio-economic level and location appear similar, and yet on closer investigation, the differences in the composition of student populations have several implications for the schools. This will be outlined below.

'At risk' student populations: migration and age

There is a difference between the student populations of School A and School B in terms of how long they have been resident in the Western Cape, and the amount of schooling received in this context. As opposed to School B, the majority of students at School A have received most or all of their schooling in the Western Cape. Several studies are being conducted around the vast number of migrants from the Eastern Cape where opportunities for employment and education are far less favourable than in the Western Cape. These

educational migrants are often inadequately prepared for schooling in a different context (urban, Western Cape). As Paterson and Kruss (1997:9) observe, (migrant children] may have come from under-resourced farm or small rural schools, or have a multiple experience of moving between schools. Such a background would impact on their ability to gain what Morrow (1993) calls 'epistemological access'.

A large number of the students at School B come from the Eastern Cape. There is a large influx of students particularly at the Grade 10 level from the Eastern Cape, where many of the schools end at Grade 9. There may be a connection between this fact and the high failure rate at this level (43% in 1997) at the school.

The fact that a large proportion of the students at School B are from the Eastern Cape has a number of implications in terms of student achievement. Migrant students encounter language problems in school, in terms of the curriculum if they are required to study Afrikaans, which has historically not been part of the curriculum in the Eastern Cape, and in terms of the fact that English is used much less both outside the schools and in the schools (particularly in the primary phase) in the Eastern Cape. Several students reported only having started to learn English in Grade 8 when they came to the Western Cape. Although English is officially the medium of instruction in both provinces, its actual use is far less prevalent in the Eastern Cape, particularly in rural contexts.

There are also social problems associated with migrancy that impact on student achievement, including the disruption of familial relationships and support. Families are frequently spread between two provinces, there is frequent (and at times disruptive) movement of students between these two contexts, which often entails long periods of absenteeism from school. The support networks of families are often also dispersed. *Thus* at *School B* we find a disproportionate number of socially and educationally vulnerable students, within a *school* that does not have the resources to address special needs, or provide the support that these students require.

Another significant difference between the two schools are the number of appropriately aged learners. At the Standard 10 level for all students in both schools the majority of students were overage, although as can be seen from the table below the percentage of overageness is much more severe in School B than it is in School A. At School B, 73% of the learners are overage and at School A 46% are overage. What is particularly significant about this data is that there is a strong correlation between failure and overage. 71% of the failures at School A and 75% of the failures at School B were overage.

School A	CORRECT AGE		OVERAGE		
	Number of learners	Percentage	Number of learners	Percentage	
Passes	104	58%	75	42%	Total Learners: 207
Failures	8	29%	20	71%	
<b>Total</b>	<b>112</b>	<b>54%</b>	<b>95</b>	<b>46%</b>	

School B	CORRECT AGE		OVERAGE		
	Number of learners	Percentage	Number of learners	Percentage	
Passes	13	32%	28	68%	Total Learners: 150
Failures	27	25%	82	75%	
<b>Total</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>27%</b>	<b>110</b>	<b>73%</b>	

Table 4: Age/Grade distribution Grade 12, School A & School B .

Although the data gathered for this study indicates that a large proportion of overage learners fail. Further, what overageness indicates is that learners' schooling has been disrupted, whether this be through failure, repetition or drop out due to either in-school or out-of-school factors, and it can be assumed that their future chances for success are less than for those students who have progressed smoothly through the schooling system. School B can thus be said to have a more "at risk" student population, if age and length of time in the Western Cape are taken as primary indicators of this.

#### *The Sample*

Twenty students from School A and twenty students from School B were interviewed, with the purpose of ascertaining how choices were made at points of institutional transition, and why these choices were made. The selection of students was based on academic achievement and gender. The five highest achieving girls, and the five highest achieving boys and the five lowest achieving girls, and the five lowest achieving boys were selected from each school so that the sample is balanced in terms of gender and is made up of the ten highest and lowest achievers from each school. The sample of students is small, and the purpose here is not to hold them as representative, but rather to point to some of the dynamics around school choice and school prestige within the context under study. Based on parental education level and occupation the sample can broadly be defined as coming from working class homes. Data on a total of 75 parents of the 40 interviewees was gathered. Of these 75 parents, almost a third (29%) were unemployed. Apart from three teachers the remaining parents were employed in service jobs, such as domestic labourers, drivers, labourers and cleaners. As regards educational level, 53% of the

parents had received no education. 15% of the parents had attained a Standard 10 pass. None of the sample had a university degree, though 8% had undertaken partial or complete courses at a college. No significant differences were found between the parental occupation and educational level of students at school A and School B.

The table below indicates the amount of schooling that students in the sample received in the Eastern Cape or in Cape Town. It can be seen that students in School A have had a more stable schooling in the Western Cape, whereas most of the sample from School B (80%) have migrated from the Eastern cape, having received the greater part of their schooling there.

	>6 years of schooling in the Eastern Cape	>6 years of schooling in Cape Town
School A	5 (25%)	15 (75%)
School B	16 (80%)	4 (20%)

*Table 5: Province where the sample received the greater part of their schooling (more than 6 years), School A & B*

#### Who Chooses?

The majority of students (55%) of the entire sample chose the schools themselves. In much of the school choice literature it is assumed that it is the parent that interfaces with the system in the choice of schools. According to the principal of School A parents are often involved in the choice of secondary school, but mainly at the transition between primary and secondary school. Most choices beyond this initial level of secondary school (Grade 8) are made by the students themselves. Although data is not available, the high incidence of institutional transition amongst students in ex-DET schools in the course of the secondary phase is well-known.

	Self	Parent/s	Sibling	Other	TOTAL
School A	11	8		1	20
School B	11	7	2		20
<b>Total</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>40</b>

*Table 6: Decision-makers of the sample in terms of selecting schools*

## Student's selection of schools

### School A

For the students at School A the vast majority stated that the school was their first choice. Seventeen of the twenty students gave reasons for their choice in reference to School A's past Standard 10 results, or in reference to the school being the "best", "important" or having a "high standard of education".

School A is considered among the best schools within the range of options available to students and parents in this context. The school was generally chosen because of the reputation it had established in the community. If School A is considered to be a 'good' school by parents and the educational community, it must be understood that this classification is relative in terms of the choices available to students. This qualification is one that is made by several of the students:

"[School A] was the best black school in the Western Cape"

"Because [School A] had the highest pass rate in [the area]"

"At [School A] you get an important education. [School A] is different from other schools in (the area). It is the best school there is around here"

(Emphasis mine)

Questions around the actual success of School A arise when one considers the percentage of students who obtained a Matriculation Exemption - 7% - meaning that only fourteen of the 207 Standard 10s at this school were able to gain access to university education. When individual subjects are considered the notion of "good" must also be seen as relative. In Mathematics, which has a high currency value in terms of entering tertiary education, the pass rate was 24%. Simply passing students is not necessarily opening doors to employment and tertiary education opportunities. What passing means needs to be - problematized, and the notion of "good" must be seen as relative to a schooling sector with a low level of student academic performance. Nonetheless, School A has clearly been established as a 'prestigious' school in the community, and it is on the basis of this reputation that the majority of students interviewed base their choice.

The choice orientation of the students/parents at School A is grounded in RAT - the school is chosen on the basis that it offers the optimal chance of academic success within the range of options available. As in the case of School B, choice is also constrained by the structural arrangement of schooling, the question of vacancies, and the delimiting of school choice in terms of locality. Although the constraint of locality is largely a result of the spatial organisation of apartheid, Harvey (1989) offers a time-space analysis which shows how this is also linked to class. He shows how the distribution of "time-space biographies" is class-related - and in this way "the organisation of space can indeed define the relationships between people, activities, things and concepts" (Harvey, 1989:216). In

this way "finite time resources and the `friction of distance' (measured in the time or cost taken to overcome it) constrain daily movement" (pg. 211).

There is also an informal local information network which operates within the locality of the schools, which informs students and parents of the more and less desirable schools. The part of the media in establishing school reputations or prestige is significant in this regard. The notice board in the principal's office of School A is pasted with press clippings referring to the school's success in the Standard 10 examinations in previous years. Their results in the 1997 exams were also picked up in the press, and in the interviews with students reference was also made to the fact that the school featured regularly in the media in response to its high pass rate.

### School B

Of the twenty students interviewed at School B, 50% stated that the school was not their first choice. They were there because all other schools were full, and it was the only school which still had places available. The fact that the students at School B stated that they could not find places at other schools is largely attributed to the fact that they had come later in the school year (generally in February and March) from the Eastern Cape as educational migrants or children of migrants.

A large proportion (35%) cited nearness to their homes as the reason for their choice. Of the remaining 15% of students interviewed, one student quoted sibling attendance as the reason, and the remaining three stated that they did not know why the school was chosen. Thus the school was generally chosen because it was close to the homes of students, or because it was the only available option.

The fact that half the students at School B chose the school as their only option raises questions of vacancy. There is a lack of attention in the literature to the notion of "no choice" and structural constraints in terms of school choice are not widely considered. In this context, the availability of school places, and the `filling up' of certain schools ahead of others needs to be considered. The lack of choice of some students in this regard-cannot be explained purely in terms of cultural inclinations which are class-related, nor in terms of RAT, but need to be viewed in the light of the `ecology' of the community's schooling, which means that in terms of the intra-stratification of schooling within this context, the "better" schools are filled first, and a hierarchy of schools in terms of vacancies is established. In the case of the students whose choice was governed by the school's proximity to their homes, for material reasons, their decisions are grounded in rational considerations of their material constraints, and their choice can thus be framed in terms of RAT.

Migrancy and overage can be taken as indicators of a more vulnerable student population profile at School B than at School A. It is clear that the students at School A are better positioned to choose than those at School B - where choice by default, or `no choice' determined to a large extent the school in which they are placed.

### Other factors

There are a number of other factors affecting the way in which choices around schools are made. The information gathered about schools by the community are also based on visual perceptions of schools. The principal at School A, as well as a number of the students interviewed at both schools, drew attention to how the school was assessed within the community in terms of how many of the students appeared to wear the school's uniform. Another visual indicator of a school's quality in the eyes of the community rested on the times of day that students were visible outside the school gate, arriving late or leaving early. A student at School B wrote in the school magazine:

The children who come late are putting our school in shame and disgrace because the community is watching them and saying bad words about the school, which means that late-coming is one *of* our big problems.

In examining student's choice of schools there is also an element of 'self exclusion' that occurs with regard to School A, which is regarded as 'prestigious'. A 30-year-old student at School B had dropped out of school, married and had children, and returned to school after an eight year absence. She had previously attended School A, but chose not to return there as she stated

*I would be shy of the teachers who taught me before I was married. They would look down at me, and they would shout me not to continue. At [School BI there are a lot of married women as opposed to other schools. I will have friends.*

Another student stated

*I prefer this school [School BI, where the others are like me, to the other high class schools like [School AI. They are like Model C schools. I am more comfortable with people here.*

It can be seen that the internal dynamics of a school create a certain interface between school and learners, and schools draw in different learners in different ways. A more finegrained class stratification within this broadly defined working class context is evident in the ways students make choices about schools. To assume that schools in this context are homogenous and serve a homogenous student population would be to ignore the subtle ways in which class-identification mediates and informs choice.

School's selection of students

In the school choice debates there has been a shift in focus to market theory related analysis of how parents choose schools, to the neglect of the way in which schools have selective mechanisms. In the context of the case studies I will show how the operation of choice both by the school and the student needs to be taken into account in examining the operation of choice and differential school performance.



White (1988) suggests that the school's power over students is a function of the competition of many (students) for one (school). By 1 December 1997, the end of the school year, School A had a notice posted on the front door saying "1998 Standard 6 full", whereas School B was sending letters to a number of primary schools in the near community stating that places were still available for Standard 6 students. School B's registration process extended two weeks into the first term of 1998; very little teaching and learning occurred during this time. School A had approximately 4500 applicants of which 400 could be accommodated. As one HOD from the school succinctly put it, "of course the parents who care the most are the first in line".

There are no clear admission policies at either of the schools, except for the fact that neither school accepts students from other schools into Standard 10 (although School B did in fact admit several new students at this level in 1998). However, there are strategies in place at School A to draw high achievers from the surrounding primary schools. Ten application forms for School A are sent to the principals of the primary schools to be given to the top ten achievers in Grade 7. Several students reported having received these forms in Grade 7, for example a student at School A stated: "I was in the top ten at primary school and I got given forms to go to (School A). At [School A] you get an important education".

The fact that principals of the primary schools appear to comply with this strategy, as well as the fact that there were a number of reports that in the case of a dispute at the Standard 10 marking centres, a school's established reputation is referred to and that prejudice significantly interferes with the objective grading of students, is indicative of the broader educational community's bias towards higher achieving schools, and that this bias can contribute to the sustaining of that success record.

The above discussion seeks to explain the dynamics of school choice in the context of the case studies, how both students and schools choose, and how these dynamics contribute to establishing certain student profiles at schools. Issues of class identification, academic results, overage and migrancy determine to a large extent the kinds of schools that students choose (or are able to choose), or the kinds of students chosen by schools. These two contingent processes of school selection impact on the student population profiles of different schools. These student populations have a differential potential to succeed, for example students who are overage, or are migrants can generally be said to be at greater risk, than those appropriately aged and having had a stable education within an urban setting. The way in which the student populations of different schools are constituted can be seen to create spirals of success and failure within the schools.

## Conclusion'

The international school choice literature has been criticized for presenting an "overly individualistic depiction of the power of clients over schools" (Pair, 1996:454). There is a focus on agency to the neglect of a sufficient analysis of structure and how this constrains or enhances choice. In the South African context it is necessary to consider agency, and the individual choices of students, in the light of the structural constraints within which these choices are made. It is also necessary to consider the ecology of schooling in specific contexts, and to consider the contingent processes of students' choice of schools and schools' choice of students.

It is useful to consider the cultural capital of students and parents within the context of the case studies presented, and their capacity for decoding the schooling system. However, an analysis of the process of choice within this context is also usefully grounded in RAT, where students and parents' choice is explained in terms of the weighing up of the costs, benefits and opportunities of schooling. The question of who is able to choose and the lack of choice for others is also significant in examining school choice in this context. Structural constraints to a large extent mitigate against choices outside the immediate locality, and choice is largely determined by the material conditions of the students' lives. Finally the intra-school stratification within this locality, and the establishing of the 'prestige' of certain schools should be considered as an important explanatory factor in considering differential school achievement and school choice.

The discussion has pointed to the fact that it is not only the students or parents that choose, but that schools also have selective mechanisms which may constrain the range of choices available to parents or students. Issues of visual perceptions of schools, and the role of the media were also shown to play a role in informing the educational community about schools, and these contribute to the establishing of hierarchies of schools within the community.

I am not suggesting that the notion of prestige comprehensively explains the differential achievement of the two schools. Other educational inputs such as curricula, the quality of teaching and learning, and school culture, organization and management capacity would also need to be considered. However, I am suggesting that Standard 10 results can be seen to have a prejudicing effect on the school choosing community, and schools that attain prestige due to good results are better positioned to attract a student population more likely to succeed. Standard 10 results therefore potentially have a halo effect in determining the subsequent results of schools. I suggest that further research into this 'selective effect' in the South African context would help to further our understanding of the differential academic performance of schools across all sectors of schooling.

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