Social Issues on the Academic Performance of Secondary School Learners in the Limpopo Province[*]

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Abstract

South Africa, after Apartheid and with a democratic government and newly amended policies, committed to provider equal opportunities to every citizen, including the right and access to education. The purpose of this study, following the state of the education system as it is, is to investigate the social issues that contribute to the poor performance of secondary school learners in South Africa, and specifically the Palala circuit in the Waterberg district, Limpopo. A mixed methods approach was used (qualitative and quantitative) to investigate the possible improvements that could be used to deal with the social issues facing secondary school learners. The target population was 10 secondary schools in the Palala circuit in the Waterberg district, Limpopo. The sample was 10 principals, 10 Head of Departments (HoDs), 10 Life Orientation teachers, and 30 learners, 3 per school in the 10 selected schools. The response rate was 93% and data was collected by using questionnaire surveys and interviews with the same 56 participants. The study revealed the predominant social issues that affect the academic performance of learners in secondary schools in the Palala circuit as poverty, teenage pregnancy, bullying, low self-esteem, and parental unemployment. The strategies to eradicate these social issues are in place and need the input and active participation of all stakeholders, especially government, community members, teachers, parents, and the learners themselves.

Keywords: Social issues, academic performance, secondary school, learners

1. INTRODUCTION

As in many other countries, education remains one of the most important basic human rights and needs in South Africa (Moyo, 2013). The Apartheid regime played a big role in segregating learners of colour, who now reside in areas burdened by a wide range of social issues, including socio-economic status, environmental, and psychological factors, which are key factors contributing to the known social issues faced by learners (Kibaara & Kabura, 2015; Taylor, 2010). However, the government after democracy in 1994 has allocated funds and devised policies and strategies to eradicate the inequality and segregation because of the oppression from the Apartheid era (Taylor, 2010). The government has managed to allocate funds including social grants and food schemes in schools with the goal of making education more accessible for those in need, usually the poverty-stricken groups from rural areas.

It is important to acknowledge the effects of the environment people live in. An environment is unarguably a contributing factor in a person's growth, as there is a difference in the welfare of people from different environments. Teh and Otman (2018) differentiate between people from different environments, stating that a healthy environment is more likely to rear a perfect individual, while a less or unhealthy environment will rear a problematic/troublesome person. It is important to

look into the demographics of students/learners while analysing and examining the possible social issues challenging them. Teh and Otman (2018) further states that, "the environment is a contributing factor to students' delinquency such as loitering, playing truant, bullying, skipping, and more". To some extent, this needs to be looked at from a South African viewpoint, as some of the highlighted delinquencies are prominent in South Africa. Considering the inequality in South Africa, where the greater part still earns below minimum wage, the environment they come from and the high rate of crime, a clear picture of how learners struggle in their academics is needed.

People reside in different areas of the country, some live in suburbs, some in townships, and others in rural areas and it is clear that the standard of living, as per the Stats SA report, is not the same. Engelbrecht, Nel, Nel and Tlale (2015) conducted a study on teachers' understanding of inclusive education in a journal titled *Enacting understanding of inclusion in complex contexts: classroom practices of South African teachers*, and one of the things that are discussed in the journal is that classrooms comprise of a heterogeneous mix of learners. This entails the difference in race, tradition, gender, beliefs, language, ability, and capabilities, and this is the same for all learners residing in different parts of the country, whether they come from rich or poor backgrounds, there will be a difference in traits and capabilities despite the social factors/issues affecting them individually. Among other issues, some of the prevalent social issues facing most South African secondary schools are pregnancy, crime, bullying, prostitution, and early parenthood (Teh & Otman, 2018)

According to Kibaara and Kabura (2015), there are many factors that contribute to secondary school learners' social issues that could impact their academic performance. In developing countries such as Kenya, India, and South Africa, the issues are quite different from developed countries. The socio-economic factors, as identified by Kibaara and Kabura (2015:1) in Kenya include the lack of electricity and proper medical care at home, child labour, the inability of parents to afford school requirements, and not enough food at home. In India, the prevailing factors are poverty, lack of secondary schools (200,000) compared to elementary schools (over 1 million). South Africa is faced with similar social issues such as electricity, parental unemployment, food, and poverty, and teenage pregnancy.

According to Kibaara and Kabura (2015), tribal intolerance, textbook to pupil ratio, pupil to teacher ratio, and insufficient facilities and classrooms are the factors impacting learner performance in Kenya. Gupta, Gupta and Kumar (2018:79) that India records over a million graduates annually, mostly from the Information Technology and Engineering faculties; however, the fact that India has no "common school system", means that students are enrolled based on their ability to pay for tuition and their social status (Lall & House, 2005:4). South Africans also have very diverse backgrounds, where learners in urban and suburban environments have better schools, buildings, transport systems, and access to technology, which leads to better academic performance (Teh & Otman, 2018:930). Other pressing factors in rural schools are the overcrowding in classrooms, the shortage of skilled teachers, insufficient facilities, and transport.

1.1. Preliminary Literature

The new South Africa, post-apartheid and newly amended policies promised to offer equal opportunities to every citizen in having access to adequate education; however, there is still a number of challenges that prevent and forces other citizens, especially children between 7 and 18 years of age to drop out of school, or consider school as unimportant (Kibaara & Kabura, 2015; Taylor, 2010). This is a result of collective failures in the implementation of strategies and inadequate solutions to remedy the situation. The purpose of this study is to investigate the social issues that contribute to the poor performance of secondary school learners in South Africa, and to scrutinise the failed solutions already implemented to solve social issues affecting secondary school learners.

The question remains: How accessible is education? It will be addressed throughout this study. Humans are natural social beings in their daily lives, and in almost everything they do, they interact

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with other individuals, which is why they tend to feel the need to belong (Starratt, 2004:724). Their interactions in society tend to form a way of life where they live by certain morals, beliefs, and traditions. Some of these have a positive impact while others have a negative impact on different individuals, and these are at the root of the social issues that we all face. Learners also face numerous social issues within the education system, some of which need serious intervention. Social issues that need intervention within schools include but are not limited to bullying, poverty, and teenage pregnancy.

1.2. Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this study is to investigate the social issues while providing solutions in secondary schools in South Africa, particularly in the Palala circuit division of the Waterberg district in Limpopo. The study firstly explores the social issues faced in schools by applying meta-synthesis methods to identify the research gap, problem, and questions, and furthermore to identify social issues in schools globally; the study then analyses the identified social issues based on applicability in the South African secondary schools and lastly, through questionnaire surveys and interviews, possible recommendations are provided for these social issues faced to secondary learners in the schools sampled for the study.

1.3. Main Research Question

How best can the known, social issues be controlled in Secondary Schools?

1.3.1. Sub-research questions

- What are the prominent well known social issues faced by learners in schools?
- From the identified social issues, which of them are relevant to South African Secondary Schools?
- What recommendations could be made to address social issues in schools?

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2. METHODOLOGY

2.1. Research Methodology

A research methodology can be defined as a channel or route used in research to guide the researcher to find solutions and answers to a research problem; it may be from following a framework, research onion, or a flow chart (Kumar, 2011). To account for the research problem, a route is followed in an attempt to find answers and deal with the research gap in the study. Initially, the study employs a meta-synthesis approach, which explores the available literature from secondary sources, help to identify the research gap, research problem, and research questions; and then a population of interest and a sample size is developed. Furthermore, by choosing to employ mixed method research (both qualitative and quantitative methods) in-depth interviews are used to conduct exploratory research and an online survey for descriptive quantifiable research. From collecting data, an analysis is done, and solutions and recommendations are provided for the research problem. This research employs an epistemological approach, narrowed to two philosophical concepts namely positivism and interpretivism. Positivism focuses on the objective knowledge, which is derived from the empirical nature of study and supported by facts and quantifiable observations, and interpretivism focuses on the subjective knowledge derived from people's perspectives and understanding (GuhaThakurta & Chetty, 2015). This particular research approach works in a sequential manner, with the research approach and method structured in the study, as the quantitative study is based on the concept of positivism where positivism is approached through a method of collecting primary data, and involve the development of hypotheses, which is later tested and confirmed with data to answer the research problem. It also caters for the qualitative study as it considers people's knowledge, the subjective meaning of events, and

social phenomena through the interpretivist approach (GuhaThakurta & Chetty, 2015). The research employed a mixed method approach where questionnaire surveys and interviews were the tools used to collect data.

2.2. Participants

The sample size was drawn from the identified population, which are secondary schools in Limpopo. The sample size for this study included secondary school learners and teachers from the Palala circuit division of the Waterberg district in Limpopo. The sample was 30 learners, 7 Life orientation teachers, 10 HoDs, and 9 Principals. Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill (2009) developed a research onion that describes and shows stages leading to the development of an effective research methodology; the study also follows a structure in a sequence, where steps in conducting the research are taken.

2.3. Instruments

Data to investigate the possible improvements that could be used to deal with the social issues facing secondary school learners were using questionnaire and interviews. For the data collection, questionnaire surveys were distributed to the sample size for participation, and interviews as a tool of qualitative data were conducted amongst the participants from the sample size. A questionnaire is said to be a widely used tool in research to collect relevant quantifiable data or information that is reliable and valid (Taherdoost, 2016). It is usually used to ensure reliability and validity by its consistent and accurate nature (Taherdoost, 2016: 29). The study employed a questionnaire survey to ensure that the data collected forms reliable and valid findings, which can be relied on in terms of the accuracy of the study. Face-to-face interviews are another type of research tool used in the study. The use of interviews and a questionnaire was to gather as much information as possible, also considering the subjective and objective point of view of the respondents. Questionnaires are used for objective information, while interviews are used for subjective information. Participants volunteered for the study. The purpose of the research was explained to the participants. The names of respondents were not identified for ethical reasons.

2.4. Data Analysis

Thematic analysis of the data was performed using open coding techniques, this required data to be carefully arranged, classified, summarized, and described in terms of useful topics to categorize the data, codes were given to themes (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). According to Tustin, Ligthelm, Martins and Van Wuk (2010), central editing involves the process of checking for completed questionnaires and wrong answers that do not necessarily answer the research questions to achieve the research objectives. The questionnaires returned from the respondents were checked, edited, and analysed to generate a percentage feedback based on the questions asked in the questionnaire surveys. For the qualitative data collected through face-to-face interviews, and themes and sub-themes were developed.

3. FINDINGS

3.1. Poverty

The overarching theme and most prominent social issue was poverty. Poverty in this context refers to the lack of resources, the inability of parents to afford school requirements, and parents or guardian unemployment. When asked about the inability of parents to afford scholastic materials, it was found that most of the learners from child-headed families, poor backgrounds, and/or disadvantaged families had no proper and clean uniforms. The uniforms were torn and worn out or it did not fit them properly (old uniform).

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Learners and teachers expressed their frustrations about the uniform. One of the teachers indicated that, "*Learners without proper uniform tend to feel insecure and has low self-esteem. They wear torn clothes without jerseys during winter; these negatively affect their school performance*".

Teacher 4: "*I once asked one of the learners, what it is that I can do to help, and I discovered that the learner didn't have a simple calculator and he also raised that they cannot afford study guides that some of the learners have.*"

The South African government, in an effort to provide equal educational access to all South Africans, provides social grants to families and children, as well as a nutritional meal to every learner at school. However, it seems that in many cases, these meals might be the only meal for the day.

Learner 2: "*No, I don't eat breakfast because I don't have time as I have to wake up early in the morning to prepare my siblings for school, so I only eat at school during lunch time*".

Learner 7: "*No, I only eat during break times at school and after school at drop-in centre because I am staying with my grandmother who is sick, and unable to prepare food for us. In the morning I sometimes fail to concentrate waiting for break time so that I can eat*".

It is clear, according to Chinyoka (2014), which the home economic situation affects learners academically and parents cannot afford to support them in their education.

The study found that the majority of students in South African schools, particularly those in rural regions, suffer from poverty as a result of the fact that the majority of parents are unemployed and dependent on social assistance. The government has been successful in allocating funds, such as social grants and food programs in schools, with the aim of making studying more accessible for those in need, typically the impoverished groups from rural areas. Despite the allocation of funds and the provision of access to education, there are still barriers that prevent some students from attending school on a daily basis or even attending at all.

3.2.　　Teenage Pregnancy and Early Parenthood

Teenage pregnancy and early parenthood is a serious concern in South Africa, together with alcohol and drug abuse.

Teacher 4: "In our area, there are two social ills that affect learners the most and they are drug abuse and teenage pregnancy."

Learner 18*: "I am staying with my grandmother who is unemployed and there is no one supporting us, so I ended up falling pregnant to get the grant to be able to put food on the table; that is the reason I ended up falling pregnant."*

Teacher 1: "Learners are not ready to deal with demands of being a parent and when it does happen, it becomes too much for them and if they have to come to school, they drop in terms of performance altogether."

Teacher 5: "In our areas there are two social issues that affect learners the most and they are drug abuse and teenage pregnancy."

The quality of the content from a teacher has the potential to build a learner, and if the teacher is not properly equipped to educated teenage learners in secondary school, there could be a possible decline in the learners' academic performance. Teenage pregnancy is a problem in most schools, and it's even worse in rural areas where there are fewer facilities and students engage in sex for entertainment.

De Wet, Amoo and Odimegwu (2018; 88) supports most of the comments mentioned and agree that among many other factors, the key factors contributing to teenage pregnancy include lack of parental care and control, lack of some material needs, poor peer guidance, lack of sex education, and the influence of alcohol and drug abuse. From the statements above, girls from vulnerable families are at risk of falling pregnant as they try to make ends meet. They often fall prey to older men, known as a

"blesser" who will provide financial support if the learner becomes pregnant. Mogotlane (2020:30) agrees that poverty-stricken learners tend to follow any possible route for finances.

Learners' psychological well-being is also a social issue impacting their school attendance and performance. Bullying and victimisation, which include sexual harassment, is cause for concern. Marx (2018:15) states that bullying can traumatise the victim, causing changes in their behaviour, personality, and self-esteem. Victims could develop depression, anxiety, and withdrawal.

Head of Department: *"Yes, pupils' esteem. I think that lack of self-esteem is affecting me in my studies because I don't really believe in myself and sometimes, I am even scared to ask teacher for help when I don't understand some topics".*

Teacher 6 confirms that some learners are not performing well due to violence and bullying at home, "*I then called in the parents and spoke to them about this problem and that's when I realised that these learners are sometimes bullied by their own parents.*"

Learner 5: *"I think it is because they have family issues, or they are being abused; I think those are the reasons."*

Violence in schools is not only directed to learners; teachers also experience violence at the hands of their learners, which could lead to teachers being stressed out, leading to absenteeism (Ramulumo & Pitsoe, 2013). One of the teachers also mentioned that they fear being bullied by learners who use drugs because they do not know how they would react if questioned.

Parental support is critical to ensure learners are actively taking part in their academic journey (Ramulumo & Pitsoe, 2013). A concern is that some parents do not regard education highly, or are themselves not very educated, and therefore do not understand their role in supporting their children. Considering how a parent views education, there is a close link to how their children eventually perform in school (Nieuwenhuis, 2018). Because of a parent's social inferiority or lack of social impact and access of funds for school programmes, the parent, given their poor educational level, may not value education as much, which in turn affects the children's readiness for school (Nieuwenhuis, 2018).

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Teacher 2: "*Parents can play must be empowered on how to assist their children and motivate their children and we need to encourage parental involvement as teacher.*"

To account for the statement by the teacher above (Mafokwane, 2017), who states that parental involvement is also a social issue of importance, it has been shown that learners who have positive support and involvement of their parents in their education tend to perform better.

3.3. Strategies to Address Social Issues

Teachers play a vital role in learners' upbringing, knowledge, development, and behaviour to some extent; learners believe the teacher over any other available source (Mohamedayupkhan & Mani, 2014).

Principal 3: *"The other intervention which I think we should go into is trying to find other structures within the community to try and help them.*"

Teacher 6: *"I think it needs other stakeholders, police maybe.*" And from Teacher 3: *"Bringing in all the stakeholders because for instances, in terms of alcoholism, tavern owners contribute and in terms of absenteeism, parents are involved, so there is a need for regular meeting with the stakeholders. As a school, we discuss with the stakeholders' ways to minimize those issues."*

Head of Department 2*: "We need to have people who have got the ability and skills that can assist and go further with advising these learners so that they can perform better. If possible, each school must have a social worker and this social worker must work on the moral of the learners."*

Teacher 1: *"If parents just play their part by supporting learners and try to give them just basic needs and where it is impossible try and cry for help."*

Teacher 3: *"Parents should regularly check their children's books, communicate with teachers and the principal, and also attend school meetings to get all the updates from the school."*

Principal 2: *"Parents need to be very much involved and supportive to these learners. Even if the learner may have been exposed and fallen into these social issues, the parents need to support them."*

From the observation of the statements and the survey, it is evident that both learners and teachers believe that parents, teachers, and external stakeholders could bring change and help combat the social issues facing learners. Teachers stated all the support system structured they think could help these learners from the impact from social issues and potentially improve their academic performance. The following were mentioned as the relevant support system structures to help in this regards are teachers, parents, social workers, psychologist and community The stakeholders, considering the context of a school, can provide "Student support programmes, behaviour modification, life skills programmes, parental involvement, and capacity building are some intervention strategies to enhance learners' performance" (Katamei & Omwono, 2015).

3.3.1. Socio-economic issues (the impact of social issues)

Learners were asked to choose the relevant social issues from a list of identified social issues and the responses were observed.

The question was a closed-ended question that provided the mentioned social issues In that affect learners academic performance. Respondents had to indicate the relevance of the mentioned social issues to the academic performance of secondary school learners. The survey results were as follow:

Table 1. List of social issues affecting learners' academic performance

Social issues	Relevant	Not Relevant
1. Crime	85%	15%
2. Pregnancy	96%	4%
3. Bullying	88%	12%
4. Prostitution	54%	46%
5. Early parenthood and/or teenage pregnancy	96%	4%
6. Poverty	96%	4%
7. Inability of parents to afford school requirement	88%	12%
8. Parents/guardian unemployment	85%	15%
9. Tribal intolerance	46%	54%
10. Stereotypes	62%	38%
11. High prevalence of drug abuse	81%	19%
12. Alcoholism	85%	15%
13. Pupil to teacher ratio (lack of teachers)	81%	19%
14. Lack of education facilities	85%	15%
15. Pupils' stress emanating from poor parental support	81%	19%
16. Pupils' anxiety prior to and during exams and stress because of poor health and nutrition	73%	27%
17. Pupils' self-esteem	88%	12%
18. Pupils attitude to attending classes	88%	12%
19. Mental preparedness of pupils	85%	15%
20. Stigma related to sickliness due to HIV/AIDS and related sickliness	73%	27%
21. Lack access to technology and high-quality content	81%	19%
22. Low motivation	77%	23%
23. Lack of competent and qualified academic staff ineffective school development management	46%	54%
24. Child marriage	38%	62%
25. Discriminatory treatment to women	38%	62%
26. Violation of human rights	38%	62%

It was found that out of the 30 learners, 81% said that the high prevalence of the drugs is one of the pertinent social concerns they confront that has a detrimental effect on their academic performance. The least detrimental effects of human rights violence are child marriage and prejudice.

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The aim of this study was to investigate the social issues affecting the performance of secondary school learners in the Palala circuit division of Waterberg district in the Limpopo province. Various issues such as crime, poverty, unemployment of parents, teenage pregnancy, and early parenthood were identified, where some of these issues are not restricted to the South African context only. In this study, the research findings were formulated and integrated with what was reported in literature to account for the research questions and objectives of the study. The findings suggested that the social issues exposed to both learners and their teachers have a negative impact on the overall academic outcome of the learners. The findings further suggested that these social issues co-exist and correlate with one another to present yet another issue; this is generated from the resulting issues of poverty forcing some learners to resort to pregnancy, alcohol, drugs, and crime, which are other social issues affecting not only learners and teachers.

Recommendations on possible strategies to eliminate these social issues have been made, which require the input and active participation of all stakeholders, especially government, community members, teachers, parents, and the learners themselves. Schools should establish functional health, alcohol, and drug committees that will ensure that learners do not use drugs, alcohol, and other substances that could lead to poor academic performance due to consistent absenteeism, bullying, and dropout. Inviting learners' role models, social, and former students to give a motivational talk that would show how they themselves addressed challenges when they were still learners and the dangers of not focusing on their schoolwork. Establishing all stakeholder forums that will include tavern owners, learner-transporters, and parents to show how each of them contributes to the academic performance of learners. Another recommendation would be to include the severity of social issues to not only the learners but to teacher and the community, because all these social issues holistically affect a school learner through its affection to the community, parents, and the teachers. From the observation of the statements and the survey, it is evident that both the learners and teachers believe that parents and teachers could bring change and help combat the social issues exposed to learners. This is supported by the statement by the teachers from the interview, for instance one of the teachers stated that parents need to be involved their children's education and be supportive, although some could have been exposed already and fallen a victim to social ills, so in hindsight the involvement shows concern and could potentially help redirect these learners and eventually their academic performance could improve. This study proposed innovative and support system methods to help reduce the challenges of learners to attain good academic results and know how to deal with social issues.

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