

Inner and Outer School Contextual Factors Associated with Poor Performance of Grade 12 Students: A Case Study of an Underperforming High School in Mpumalanga, South Africa

Victoria L. Nkosi, Parvaneh Farhangpour

I. INTRODUCTION

Abstract—Often a Grade 12 certificate is perceived as a passport to tertiary education and the minimum requirement to enter the world of work. In spite of its importance, many students do not make this milestone in South Africa. It is important to find out why so many students still fail in spite of transformation in the education system in the post-apartheid era. Given the complexity of education and its context, this study adopted a case study design to examine one historically underperforming high school in Bushbuckridge, Mpumalanga Province, South Africa in 2013. The aim was to gain a understanding of the inner and outer school contextual factors associated with the high failure rate among Grade 12 students. Government documents and reports were consulted to identify factors in the district and the village surrounding the school and a student survey was conducted to identify school, home and student factors. The randomly-sampled half of the population of Grade 12 students (53) participated in the survey and quantitative data are analyzed using descriptive statistical methods. The findings showed that a host of factors is at play. The school is located in a village within a municipality which has been one of the poorest three municipalities in South Africa and the lowest Grade 12 pass rate in the Mpumalanga province. Moreover, over half of the families of the students are single parents, 43% are unemployed and the majority has a low level of education. In addition, most families (83%) do not have basic study materials such as a dictionary, books, tables, and chairs. A significant number of students (70%) are over-aged (+19 years old); close to half of them (49%) are grade repeaters. The school itself lacks essential resources, namely computers, science laboratories, library, and enough furniture and textbooks. Moreover, teaching and learning are negatively affected by the teachers' occasional absenteeism, inadequate lesson preparation, and poor communication skills. Overall, the continuous low performance of students in this school mirrors the vicious circle of multiple negative conditions present within and outside of the school. The complexity of factors associated with the underperformance of Grade 12 students in this school calls for a multi-dimensional intervention from government and stakeholders. One important intervention should be the placement of over-aged students and grade-repeaters in suitable educational institutions for the benefit of other students.

Keywords—Inner context, outer context, over-aged students, vicious circle.

V.L. Nkosi is a Youth in Development (BYID) honor graduate from University of Venda, Limpopo, South Africa.

P. Farhangpour (PhD) is a senior educational practitioner at Centre for Higher Education Teaching and Learning (CHETL) at University of Venda, Limpopo, South Africa (e-mail: Parvaneh.farhangpou@univen.ac.za).

COMPLETING Grade 12 is a turning point in the life of students and a determining factor for their success in the future. In today's world having a Grade 12 certificate is the minimum requirement to start tertiary education or enter the work market. Research has shown that youth who do not have a Grade 12 certificate are more likely to remain unemployed (by 36%) compared to those who have it (by 25%) [1]. South Africa has been intensely engaged in attempts to improve the poor Grade 12 pass rate since the dawn of democracy and is still grappling with the legacy of low-quality education since the time of apartheid [2]. For example, in 2012 nationally only 73.9% of registered Grade 12 students passed the grade and of that number only 26.6% achieved university entrance. This challenge had been present for some years before the time of this study. As expected, some provinces had been performing worse than others [3]. The national Grade 12 results of 2009 to 2012 (Table I) [3] indicate that Mpumalanga, Limpopo, and Eastern Cape had consistently performed lower than other provinces.

TABLE I
NATIONAL AND PROVINCIAL GRADE 12 PASS RATES 2009–2012

Province	2009	2010	2011	2012
Gauteng	71.8 %	78.6 %	81.1 %	83.9 %
Western Cape	76.8 %	67.8 %	82.9 %	82.8 %
North West	67.5 %	75.7 %	77.8 %	79.5 %
Northern Cape	61.3 %	72.3 %	68.8 %	74.6 %
Kwa-Zulu Natal	67.1 %	70.7 %	68.1 %	73.1 %
Free State	69.4 %	70.7 %	75.7 %	81.1 %
Eastern Cape	51 %	58.3 %	58.1 %	61.6 %
Limpopo	48.9 %	57.9 %	63.9 %	66.9 %
Mpumalanga	47.9 %	56.8 %	64.8 %	70 %
National	60.6 %	67.8 %	70.2 %	73.9 %
Passed with exemption (university entrance)	19.9 %	23.5 %	24.3 %	26.6 %

One of the provinces experiencing difficulties throughout the years is Mpumalanga. The province obtained a 47.9% Grade 12 pass rate in 2009, 56.8% in 2010, 64.8% in 2011, and 70% in 2012, showing 11%, 8% and 5.2% improvement between 2009 and 2012 respectively [3]. In spite of the 70% pass rate in 2012, out of 47,889 students who sat for examinations in this province, 14385 (30%) failed and only 9495 (19.8%) qualified for a bachelor's programme at

university [4]. Moreover, the average Grade 12 pass rate of this province had been consistently lower than the national results between 2009 and 2012 by 12.7%, 11%, 5.5%, and 5.4% respectively, as Table I displays. The situation raises the question: “*Why do some schools consistently produce poor results and what factors play a part?*”

To answer this question the researcher chose one underperforming rural high school in Mpumalanga where she had completed her secondary school education. This school hereafter will be referred to as the “*Researched School*” (RS) for ethical reasons and confidentiality.

II. RESEARCH PROBLEM, AIM AND QUESTIONS

RS is a high school situated in Bohlabela District under Bushbuckridge Municipality in Mpumalanga Province. The Grade 12 pass rate of this school had been low during three consecutive years prior to this study in 2013: 56.7% in 2010, 70% in 2011, and 54.2% in 2012 respectively, which made it an underperforming school. The broad aim of the study was to identify factors in the surroundings of the school, students’ homes, and students themselves (outer factors), as well as factors within RS (inner factors) that negatively affect the performance of Grade 12 students. The intention behind the study was to provide a holistic picture of influential factors in order to enhance our understanding of the complex and multidimensional factors that impact the academic performance of students in this rural school. The research questions were:

1. What are the demographics and socioeconomic characteristics of the village and the region where RS is located?
2. Which academic, social, and economic factors within the homes of Grade 12 students negatively affect their performance?
3. Which academic attitudes and academic behavior by Grade 12 students negatively affect their performance?
4. Which academic, social, and economic factors within RS negatively affect the performance of Grade 12 students?

It was assumed that the findings of this study would increase our insight into the interacting factors that affect students’ performance and provide an overview of the complex challenges that students and the school face. Such a study would better inform officials of the education district and the school authorities and motivate them to come up with possible intervention plans.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Outer Contextual Factors: Home Factors

1. Education and Parental Socioeconomic Circumstances

Education does not end in the school; it continues at home. Some studies have found that students whose parents are educated are more likely to score higher on standardized tests than those students whose parents are uneducated [5]. The socioeconomic conditions of parents also play a role. Studies by researchers [6] and [7] have shown that students’ academic

achievement is negatively affected by the low socioeconomic status of parents. It is estimated that in South Africa about 12 million children live in households with a per capita income of less than R350 per month [8]. This situation makes it very difficult for parents to provide the learning material that their children need.

2. Marital Status of Parents

The marital status of parents, namely, whether the parent is single, married, divorced, or widowed, affects the social status of the family and eventually the self-concept of their children [9]. Children may become victims of family stigma, for example, because of divorce, and suffer discrimination.

3. Household Chores

The responsibility of doing household chores adds to the factors negatively affecting the performance of students. Most students, especially girls, are expected to take care of their siblings, and do the cooking and cleaning. As a result, they may arrive late at school or have little time to study, causing them to perform poorly at school [10].

4. Student Factors

Students’ lack of commitment may influence their academic performance. It is believed that students with low commitment tend to display higher levels of disruptive behavior [11]. Some researchers argue that lack of respect for educators is the main cause of disciplinary problems in the classroom and one of the major causes of poor performance [12], [13].

5. Low Self-Esteem

Students’ low self-esteem is noted as a negative factor, whereas a positive self-concept is a factor that encourages students to experiment and believe in their ability to master new tasks [11], [14]. Very often, students with low self-esteem do not take a risk in learning new things, and tend to have negative attitudes toward themselves.

B. Inner Contextual Factors: School Factors

1. School Management

In the early 21st century attention has been diverted to school leadership and management and their role in the success of schools [15]. Some researchers have considered the role of the school governing body and school management [16], whereas others have studied the organizational system of schools [17]. It is commonly agreed that the management and leadership of a school powerfully influences the school environment and sets the tone for teachers and the school community, and that the nature and quality of school leadership is the key to students’ success [18].

2. Language of Teaching

Use of the mother tongue by teachers in the classroom, instead of English as the medium of instruction, is a common practice that can lead to students’ poor performance [19]. In South Africa there are 11 constitutionally recognized languages, of which nine are African languages, and from Grade 4 teachers are required to teach all subjects, with the

exception of the home language, in English. However, despite curriculum requirements, a teacher speaking the same African language as her learners does, in fact, switch to that language in class from time to time. Yet students must have sufficient opportunity to hear and practice speaking and writing in English in order to express their ideas adequately when they sit for examinations. A researcher [20] explains that language is more than a means of communication; it is also a resource for creative thought, and understanding the world. Those who have language problems are more likely to face learning problems because of the language barrier.

3. Teacher's Preparation

Lesson preparation is vital for effective teaching and learning to take place [21]. Teachers are the key in the education process. Failure to prepare lessons on the part of a teacher, results in a waste of students' time and low-quality teaching, which eventually affect students' performance. Research has shown that absenteeism and lack of discipline by teachers reduce the amount of instructional time and lead to students' weak academic foundation [22], [23]. In addition, absenteeism by both teachers and students is a sign of low motivation. Lack of motivation in students is often manifested as absenteeism, incomplete homework, and a refusal to study [24], [25].

4. School's Resources

School's facilities and resources, such as libraries, laboratories, computers, and textbooks have a direct effect on students' learning [26]. Such resources assist students in understanding difficult concepts and promote effective learning [27].

5. Class Size

Class size also matters. An increase in class size results in ineffective class management, poor supervision of assignments and ineffective teaching and teacher contacts. Research studies have shown that students in smaller classes perform better academically than those in larger classes [23], [25].

6. Interaction between Parents and School

The interaction between school and parents is another important factor. Communication between teachers and parents will inform parents of their children's academic needs and progress [28]. As a result, parents will be better able to motivate and support their children when they know what teachers expect of them.

IV. METHOD

A. Research Design

Education does not happen in a vacuum. Even though schools may have common challenges, yet their contexts and circumstances are unique and thus they experience different challenges. Based on this assumption this study used the case study design. The purpose of a case study is to investigate the complex dynamics of a single system [29] and throw light on

the contextual factors and conditions around the research problem. It provides a "comprehensive and holistic understanding" [30] of how different elements within a case interact and affect each other. The purpose is to bring to light hidden and interesting information about the case. Case study design uses multiple methods or "lenses" to examine different facets of the phenomenon which is studied [31]. Within this case study the researcher used two approaches to answer the research questions. To find answers to the question on the demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of the school, the researcher adopted document study and analysis approach to review government reports, and other published documents. Some researchers maintain that organizational documents and records are the richest source of data and are even more reliable when they are produced by the government [32]. For the other research questions the researcher used a non-experimental, quantitative and descriptive approach. The researcher developed a self-administered survey questionnaire to explore negative, influential factors within the homes, students and the school.

B. Study Location

The study location was RS, an underperforming rural high school in Croquet Lawn village that falls under the Bushbuckridge local municipality in Mpumalanga Province, South Africa. In addition to serving learners from the village, RS also serves learners from Newington 'A' and 'B', Agincourt RDP, and Areagh 'A' village.

C. Study Participants and Sampling Procedure

The population in this study were the male and female Grade 12 students who had studied at RS in 2013. Of the total population (106) of Grade 12 students, half were randomly selected. Probability sampling was adopted because it is the most reliable method whereby everyone in the population has an equal chance of being included [33]. The researcher adopted the fishbowl random-draw method to select the 53 participants.

D. Data Collection Method and Data Analysis

A questionnaire was designed by the researcher. It consisted of four sections and thirty-six closed questions: demographics; influential academic, social and economic factors in the school; influential academic, social and economic factors at home; and, student's academic attitude and behavior. In closed questions answers are presented in boxes. The participants completed the questionnaire by selecting the appropriate boxes of their choice. The questionnaire was first pilot-tested to ensure internal validity and was improved accordingly [34].

Data analysis is the process of making sense of the data and interpreting what respondents have said and what the researcher has seen and read [35]. The quantitative data was analysed using descriptive statistical methods of percentages and frequencies. In compliance with research ethical practice, participants signed a consent form and were informed of their right to privacy, voluntary participation, and right of withdrawal, before completing the questionnaire.

V. RESULTS

A. Outer Contextual Factors

1. Demographic and Socio-Economic Conditions of the Municipality

RS is located in Croquet Lawn Village under Bushbuckridge municipality in Mpumalanga Province. The Bushbuckridge local municipality consists of 135 villages and rural settlements and borders the Kruger National Park. This municipality has a large population of over 530,000 [36]. Economically it is very poor as between 25–50% of the population are unemployed. It is estimated that about 75% of its population live below the poverty line, which makes this municipality one of the poorest three places in South Africa [36], [37]. The municipality is dependent on government support as its two productive sectors, namely, agriculture and tourism, are underdeveloped and do not meet their potential [36]. In terms of education, this municipality is very poor, especially with respect to Grade 12 pass rates, which have been the worst in Mpumalanga Province [36]. There are 139 primary and 170 secondary schools, three hospitals, 30 clinics, two mobile clinics, and two community health centres in the area.

2. Demographic and Socioeconomic Conditions of the Village

Croquet Lawn Village is characterised by high levels of poverty, poorly educated residents, and high levels of unemployment. It lacks access to basic infrastructure and services, such as access to regular water and proper sanitation [37]. In 2013, 551 households lived in this village, with a higher number of females (1899) in comparison with males (1780). The main cause of death among people in this village has been HIV/AIDS [38]. The main source of income for people in this village is ploughing maize, growing pumpkins and other crops, and looking after cattle. The village has five taverns, two of which are within walking distance of RS.

RS falls within Bohlabela Education District. This district has performed lower than other districts in the province for a number of years. For example, in 2012 Bohlabela Education District performed at 62.5% pass rate, which was the lowest of all four districts in the region: Ehlanzeni District 74%; Nkangala District 73%; and, Gert Sibande District at 69% [39]. This indicates the history of poor performance in the schools under Bohlabela District, which operates under Bushbuckridge with the lowest Grade 12 pass rate of all municipalities in Mpumalanga [36].

3. Factors within the Home

The respondents pointed out the academic, social and economic conditions prevalent in their homes which could negatively affect their performance. A summary of these factors is reflected in Table II.

4. Home Academic Factors

The data showed that slightly above one-third (35%) of the parents helped their children with school work, while some

were helped by their siblings (13%), 19% by neighbors, but one-third of the participants (33%) had no one to help them. Around 21% of the parents had no education and 35% had below Grade 10 education, which explains why most parents could not help their children with their school work. Moreover, the majority of respondents (84%) had to spend some time on household chores such as cooking and gardening.

TABLE II
HOME FACTORS

FACTORS	N = 53 Response of participants in percentage (%)					
HOME ACADEMIC FACTORS						
Home work assistance at home	Helped by parents 35%	Siblings' help 13%	Neighbors' help 19%	No one to help 33%		
Parents level of education	Tertiary 19%	Grade 11–12 25%	Grade 8–10 13%	Grade 4–7 14%	Grade 1–3 8%	None 21%
Involved in doing household chores	Cooking 52%	Gardening 13%	Other 9%	None 16%		
Time on house chores per day	1–2 hours 76%	2:30–3 hours 19%	30 minutes or less 5%			
HOME SOCIAL FACTORS/RELATIONSHIPS						
Family structure	Respondent lives with both parents 29%	Respondent lives with single parent 54%	Respondent lives with guardian 17%			
Relationship with parents/guardian	Very good 72%	Good 21%	Poor 7%			
Atmosphere at home	Peaceful 96%		Violent 4%			
Treatment at home	Good 74%	Average 18%	Bad 8%			
HOME ECONOMIC FACTORS/RESOURCES						
Parents' employment status	Employed 57%		Unemployed 43%			
Type of parents' employment	Civil servant 54%	Private sector 19%	Domestic worker 23%	Self-employed 2%		
Parents buy school supplies	Could afford 33%	Could afford some 61%	Could not afford any 6%			
Availability of study resources	TV 19%	Newspaper 13%	Magazines 9%	Dictionary 15%		
Furniture available	Chairs 17%		Tables 18%			

5. Home Social Factors

The majority of participants (54%) lived in a single parent family whereas only 20% lived with both parents, and the rest (17%) stayed with a guardian. The majority of participants (72% and 21%) enjoyed a good relationship with their parents and 96% lived in a peaceful environment and were treated well by the people around them (74%).

6. Home Economic Factors/Resources

Table II shows that close to half (43%) of the parents were unemployed. Of those who were employed, 54% were civil servants; 19% worked in the private sector; 2% were self-employed, and about one-fifth (23%) were domestic workers. This means that only about half of the parents held jobs that enjoy a higher social status and 61% of participants said they could buy only some of the necessary study supplies. Strikingly, the majority of homes lacked basic educational materials. For example, only 9% of participants had access to a computer at home, 15% had a dictionary, and 22% had access to newspapers and magazines. Of essential study furniture, only 17% of homes had chairs and 18% had a table.

7. Students' Factors

Participants were asked about their commitment to school work, the importance they ascribed to education, their study habits, and their feelings about failing. The summary of their responses is given in Table III.

TABLE III
STUDENTS' FACTORS

Factors	N = 53			
	Response of participants (%)			
Arrival at school	On time 32%	Sometimes late 53%		Often late 15%
Repeating Grade 12	First-time Grade 12 51%		Grade 12 repeater 49%	
Importance of education	Very important 100%			
Study habits	Studies every day 49%	Studies three times a week 6%	Studies once a week 24%	Studies before exam 21%
Feelings about failing	Very sad 79%		Sad 21%	

The results show that the majority of participants (53%) sometimes arrived late at school, and felt sad about failing, yet less than half (49%) of them studied every day and the other 51% studied at intervals of three times and once a week; close to a quarter (21%) studied only before examinations. This is in spite of the fact that all of them perceived education as very important and close to half of them (49%) were repeating Grade 12.

B. Inner Contextual Factors/School Factors

Within the school three categories of factors were identified: academic, social, and economic.

1. Academic Factors

Table IV displays the contributing academic factors within the school. Of the total 53 Grade 12 participants, 51% were between the ages of 19 and 21 years; 19% were older than 22 years. Overall, 70% of the participants were over-aged in contrast to only 30% who were within the expected age of 16 to 18 years. About two-thirds of students (66%) attended average size classes, while about one-third (34%) attended overcrowded classes of 41 to 60 students.

In respect of teachers' class attendance, according to almost half of the participants (45%), teachers' attendance was irregular; 43% indicated that teachers sometimes prepared for

lessons, and 12% said that teachers did not prepare at all. Physical Science, English, and Mathematics were the most difficult subjects for most students, a situation for which participants gave different reasons. Some of them (30%) said that the subject was difficult because they did not understand the teacher, 21% blamed poor teaching, 20% blamed the teacher's strictness, and 18% blamed students' lack of practice. In respect of the previous term's performance, close to half of the participants (43%) had performed below 40% and failed the term, in contrast to only 10% who excelled with 71% and above. In effect, only 57% of participants had passed the semester. Understanding the language of instruction, namely English, was also a problem as close to half of the participants (46%) said they had difficulty in understanding the language of teaching and learning.

TABLE IV
ACADEMIC FACTORS

Factor	N = 53			
	16-18 yrs	19-21 yrs	22-23 yrs	24 + yrs
Students' age	30%	51%	11%	8%
Class size	20-40 in a class 66%	41-60 in a class 34%		
Teachers' attendance	Regular 55%		Irregular 45%	
Teachers prepare	Usually prepared 45%		Sometimes prepared 43%	Did not prepare 12%
Most difficult subjects	Phys. Science 29%	English 18%	Mathematics 14%	History 13%
Reasons for subject difficulty	Lack of understanding 30%	Poor quality teaching 21%	Teacher strictness 20%	Students fail to practice 18%
Previous term average mark	30-40 (poor) 43%	41-56 (average) 30%	57-70 (good) 17%	71+ (excellent) 10%
Understanding language of instruction	Well understood 54%		Sometimes understood 36%	Seldom understood 10%

2. School Social Factors/Classroom Atmosphere

The survey also investigated teachers' attitude towards students, students' attitude towards the teachers, reasons for disliking some subjects, the relationship between parents and the school, and their attendance of school meetings. The summary of participants' responses is reflected in Table V.

Participants had different experiences of their teachers' treatment and attitude. Only about half of the participants (51%) felt they were well-treated by their teachers, whereas (11%) were unhappy with them. In the same vein, the majority of participants (57%) disliked the teachers who taught subjects they considered difficult. The reason why 47% of the participants disliked the teachers of difficult subjects was poor communication. Only 42% of the participants felt free to ask questions in class, while 12% did not feel free at all. In respect of the relationship between the school and parents, close to

half of the participants (45%) said parents were not invited to school for meetings, and just a little above half of the parents (55%) attended such meetings.

TABLE V
SOCIAL FACTORS

Factors	N = 53				
Teachers' attitude towards students	Good	Average			Poor
	51%	38%			11%
Students' relationship with teachers	Good	Average			Poor
	43%	0%			57%
Reasons for disliking subject teachers	Poor communication	Boring subject	Teacher strict	Difficult subject	Too much work
	47%	20%	15%	15%	3%
Freedom to ask questions in class	Always allowed	Sometimes allowed			Not allowed
	42%	46%			12%
Relationship between school and parents	Teachers called parents to school				Teachers did not call parents to school
	55%				45%
Parents attendance in school meetings	Attended	Sometimes attended			Did not attend
	55%	31%			14%

3. School Economic Factors/Resources

The availability of a library, computer laboratory, textbooks, and methods of handling textbooks by students, as well as the availability of classroom furniture and its condition were explored in the next section of the questionnaire. The results are summarized in Table VI.

TABLE VI
SCHOOL ECONOMIC FACTORS

Factors	N = 53			Response of participants
Availability: school library				None existing
Availability: computer lab				None existing
Availability: science laboratory				None existing
Availability: textbooks	Has all textbooks	Has some textbooks	Has no textbooks	
	13%	65%	22%	
Method of using textbooks	Given individually	Shared in pairs	Shared in groups	
	40%	40%	20%	
Availability: classroom furniture	Enough furniture	Not enough furniture		
	38%	62%		
Condition of resources	Good	Some are good	Not good	
	38%	2%	60%	
Condition of classrooms	Good condition	Average	Poor	
	2	53%	45%	

As indicated by the respondents, this high school did not have a library, a computer laboratory, or a science laboratory. The majority of participants (65%) had some of the textbooks whereas 22% had no textbooks. The majority of participants (62%) said that the number of chairs and desks available in the

classrooms was insufficient and that the furniture available was mostly in a moderate to poor condition.

VI. DISCUSSION

The study sought to identify factors within RS and outside of the school which negatively affected the performance of Grade 12 learners. It covered conditions in the wider environment of the geographical surroundings of the school, the village and the district, in the students' homes and within the students themselves that contributed to the poor academic performance of Grade 12 students at RS.

The socioeconomic conditions of the Croquet Lawn village where the high school under study is situated denote a deprived community where the majority of residents are unemployed, have a low level of education, and have experienced the debasing effects of poverty for years. Research has shown that the socioeconomic conditions and contextual environment of the school and the community where students live have an impact on the school's functioning and eventually on the performance of learners [40]-[42]. The impoverished community and the poorly performing district education office have created a negative educational local environment for learning in this school. Furthermore, the presence of two taverns in close proximity to the school, make its environmental context unfavorable for learning.

At home, the majority of the participants (71%) lived in single parent/guardian families where almost half of them (43%) were unemployed. Parents often could not afford the cost of paying for the learning material. The socioeconomic conditions of parents have been identified as a major contributing factor in students' performance [43]-[49]. Moreover, one-fifth of the parents had no education and about a third (35%) had below Grade 10 education, which explains why they could not assist their children with Grade 12 homework. Children of mothers with no education seem to display higher levels of emotional problems [11] and in general parental involvement plays a major role in their school performance [50]. A huge majority of the students (84%) had to do household chores for one-to-two hours daily and lived in a home that they had no access to basic educational materials, such as books, a dictionary, a computer, and basic study furniture such as a table and chair to do their homework. A study [51] demonstrated a positive correlation between the presence of study materials at home and academic performance, and this indicates their importance for effective learning at home and at school.

Looking at factors within the students, the study found that about half of the participants (49%) were grade repeaters, over half of them arrived late at school and about one-fifth of them studied only once a week or just before the examinations, all indicating low motivation, a quality which is shared by some teachers [52], [53]. Repetitive failure is shown to decrease students' self-esteem [45] and irregular studying contributes to ineffective learning. Moreover, it is found that there is a positive correlation between daily study hours and academic performance [54]. Therefore, it is not surprising that those students who had spent only a little time on their studies, or

had studied just before examinations, failed the first term examinations.

Within the school, one of the striking factors was students' age. The majority of the Grade 12 students (70%) were over-aged and about half (49%) were repeating the grade. Over-aged students can become a threat both to themselves and to other students. This factor could arise from the fact that their chronological and physical differences from younger students make them feel out of place; some may even bully younger students who are socially less experienced than them. Grade repeaters are often demotivated to pursue academic activities, and this factor negatively affects their performance [41], [55]. This has proved true as almost half of the participants (43%) failed the term's examinations. Research has shown that previous poor performance is a predictor of future performance [41]. Another contributing factor was overcrowded classes, a factor which is more common in rural than in urban areas [56] and is considered a negative factor [25]. Understanding the language of instruction is crucial to comprehension of the subject matter. About one-third of the students in this study did not understand the language of instruction and had communication problems. This result is consistent with the findings by other researchers [41], [57] that show a positive relation between students' performance and students' competence in English.

Coming to teachers' performance, according to the participants close to half of the teachers attended classes irregularly and had not prepared the lessons adequately. This result concurs with another research study that found teachers' irregular class attendance is a problem in more than 70% of South African schools [58]. Teachers' lack of commitment and its negative impact on students' achievement has already been noted in a number of studies [22], [25], [59].

As far as the relationship of teachers towards students and parents is concerned, teachers mostly had a good relationship with their students but did not involve the parents enough. The benefits of the involvement of parents in their children's education have been long recognized. Research has revealed that parental involvement not only helps to improve students' academic performance but most importantly, it inculcates a positive attitude towards schooling in students [27], [60], [61]. More than half of the students (57%) in this study had a negative attitude toward the teachers of difficult subjects and experienced poor communication with them. It is noted that communication has a direct effect on the performance of students [62], thus it is not surprising that students who disliked their teachers had difficulty in communicating with them. This is an important factor because attitudes by both teachers and students can affect performance [52]. The combination of a negative relationship with teachers, poor language skills and communication, and low contact between parents and school, creates a defective learning atmosphere for students. On top of these factors, the school lacks essential facilities of a library, science and computer laboratories, school furniture and suitable classrooms, and students (65%) are deprived from having enough textbooks. Lack of resources is linked to poor academic performance [23].

VII. CONCLUSION

Factors contributing to the poor performance of Grade 12 students at RS were multi-dimensional and multilevel. RS is a rural school located in a village and a district which for years have been characterized by poverty and poor-quality education. The school lacks essential facilities and textbooks, some teachers are negligent and do not prepare for classes, many students are overaged, grade-repeaters, have poor study habits and come from families which are economically strained, and educationally not equipped to assist their children. In conclusion, the failing students in this school mirror the defective environment in which they live. Their failure reflects the effects of a vicious circle of poverty, and low-quality education, which has continued for years.

A. Recommendations

The factors causing low performance among Grade 12 students at RS are multidimensional and complex, thereby making the task of intervention more demanding and difficult. In some respects, it seems unlikely that the socioeconomic conditions of the village and the parents will be addressed in the near future. However, addressing some of the challenges that are experienced by students is possible. The following recommendations are proposed in order to address the poor performance by students at RS:

1. School management should propose to the national Department of Education the placement of over-aged students to adult education centers (ABET).
2. School management should arrange a scheduled study period because most students cannot find time to study at home and have no appropriate place in which to study.
3. Teachers should be encouraged to use English, and not the home language, for subjects offered in English to improve students' understanding of the subject matter in their respective subjects.
4. School management should ensure that teachers attend classes regularly and that lessons are thoroughly prepared.
5. School management should convene meetings which involve students' parents. Letters should be sent regularly to increase home-school involvement.
6. The Department of Basic Education should conduct teacher development workshops to equip teachers with creative teaching and learning methods for challenging subjects.
7. The Department of Basic Education should prioritise the provisioning of textbooks, furniture, and other essential material to this school.

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