

# **GRADE REPETITION IN SOUTH AFRICA:**

facts, figures and  
possible interventions



prepared by social surveys

# INTRODUCTION

This fact sheet is designed for educators, concerned community and parent organisations, as well as education officials. It provides facts and figures on the extent of grade repetition in South Africa, and which learners are most vulnerable to repeating grades. It also provides suggestions for improving learners' chances of progressing through school efficiently.

This fact sheet, the fourth in a series of five, is based on the findings of the Access to Education study, which was undertaken by Social Surveys and the Centre for Applied Legal Studies (CALs). The study focuses on the barriers children and youth aged 7 to 18 face, entering and completing school. It began with in-depth conversations with educators, caregivers and youth in urban and rural communities on the difficulties youth face in remaining in school. In late 2007 Social Surveys travelled across all the provinces in South Africa, conducting a nationally representative household survey with caregivers in 4400 households. Youth in these households who were aged 16 to 18 were also interviewed.

## FACTS

- Government policy states that a learner may repeat no more than once per school phase. There are four, three-year school phases, so a learner can repeat up to four times in her school career.
- Repetition (rather than being absent from school for a substantial period) is the main reason why learners do not finish school within a reasonable time in South Africa.

## WHAT OUR RESEARCH SAYS ABOUT GRADE REPETITION

There is a strong school going culture among children aged 7 to 18 in South Africa, with 96% in school. Many youth, however, do not complete schooling up to Matric (see Factsheet 1: School Drop-Out in South Africa). In addition, learners take a long time to get through the schooling system as repeating one grade, or more, is common in South Africa.

WHO IS MOST VULNERABLE?	WHY?
Learners attending poor performing and poorly resourced schools: 39% of children in Quintile 1 schools have repeated vs. 19% in Quintile 5 schools.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High repetition rates are not necessarily an indicator of learners accessing poor quality schooling, but attending a school that lacks resources (including teachers not having qualifications) does make repetition more likely.</li> <li>• These schools do not have dedicated resources or educators to provide additional support to learners who are struggling with their school work.</li> </ul>
Learners living in former homelands (especially in Limpopo and Mpumalanga).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The quality of schooling in former homelands tends to be lower than in other areas.</li> <li>• Household poverty also plays a role (see below).</li> </ul>
Learners living in poverty-stricken households.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Poverty affects learners' ability to learn e.g. distractions of household and caring responsibilities; not having a quiet place to study; going to school hungry which affects concentration; caregivers not being able to help children with homework etc.</li> <li>• Poorer children are less likely to access good quality education.</li> <li>• Caregivers in poorer households are less likely to be well educated, which has an effect on their children's school results (see below).</li> </ul>
Learners whose caregivers have had little or no education.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Caregivers with higher levels of education may be better able to assist children with their homework and provide an environment where ideas and subjects in the classroom are reinforced in their home environment.</li> <li>• Parental education can be an indicator of higher household income and better access to resources (e.g. better quality schooling for children).</li> </ul>



<p>Learners who do <b>not</b> include English as a home language.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• English is the main language of instruction after Foundation phase (grade 1-3), and is the language used in tests and exams. Children who do not communicate in English regularly have greater difficulty following the curriculum.</li> <li>• English spoken at home is also an indicator that a household has more resources to send their children to better quality schools.</li> </ul>
<p>Black learners are six times more likely to repeat than white learners.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In South Africa, race is often an indicator of social class and there are many ways in which middle class children are privileged by the education system.</li> <li>• Black children are less likely to access good quality education, more likely to live in poverty (see above) and are more likely to have less educated caregivers (see above).</li> </ul>
<p>Boys (the biggest gap between boys and girls is experienced by black and coloured children).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In general, girls progress faster in school than boys (a common finding internationally) which may be related to different development stages (females mature earlier).</li> <li>• Girls are less likely to participate in high-risk behaviour such as substance abuse.</li> </ul>
<p>Learners with some form of disability (especially intellectual, behavioural and communication issues).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Disability may affect a child's ability to learn and participate fully in the class room.</li> <li>• Learners with a disability may be socially excluded from actively participating in class.</li> <li>• Many schools do not adequately cater for learning and other disabilities.</li> </ul>

## FACTS

- 35% of learners in school have repeated.
- 21% of learners in the Foundation phase have repeated,
- 52% of learners have repeated by the time they were in the FET phase.
- 9% of learners in the FET phase had repeated three or more times.

Source: Household Survey: Caregiver interviews.

- Only 11% of learners from a household where the head of household had a tertiary education had repeated a grade.
- 42% of learners residing in a household where the head of household had no formal education had repeated a grade.
- 84% of white children attend Quintile 5 or private schools.
- 11% of black children attend Quintile 5 or private schools.

Source: Household Survey: Caregiver interviews.

HOME LANGUAGE	NEVER REPEATED
English	88.4%
Afrikaans	75.3%
Setswana	66.2%
IsiZulu	66.0%
IsiXhosa	63.2%
Sesotho	63.2%
IsiNdebele	61.4%
Siswati	60.0%
Sepedi	59.1%
Tshivenda	52.5%

## WHAT HAPPENS WHEN LEARNERS REPEAT A GRADE?

Learners experiencing grade repetition are older than their peers in the same grade. The more often learners repeat a grade, the older they are compared to their classmates, and the more they differ from the age that children should be in a grade as specified by the Department of Basic Education.

- **School:** because repetition is common in South Africa, there is a large spread of ages in each grade. This steadily increases with each grade, with a higher percentage of learners older than the age-grade norm in each year. The Social Surveys-CALS study found that over 95% of primary school learners were the correct age for their phase of schooling, but only 60% of learners in the FET phase (Grades 10 to 12) were the right age for their grade.
- **Classroom:** teaching becomes more difficult as educators have to cater for learners with large differences in teaching and social needs. For example, a Grade 9 educator at an 'average' South African school could be teaching learners from the age of 13 to those in their early twenties in the same class – a challenging task even for a skilled and dedicated educator.
- **Individual:** being older than their peers may have an effect on a learner's self-esteem, relationships with classmates, and attitude towards school. The Social Surveys-CALS study shows that the more learners repeat, the more likely they are to drop out of school. Ten percent of youth aged 16 to 18 said that they had left school because of repetition and difficulties associated with being older than classmates, including being humiliated by teachers and experiencing difficulties adjusting to their younger classmates.

## QUOTES FROM YOUTH IN OUR STUDY

"I know how important education is in our times, when my peers were promoted to Grade 9, leaving me behind... I gave-up. I asked myself 'what is wrong with me? But Mama forced me to go back to school.'" (Focus groups with over-age learners.)

"I don't think I will pass Grade 12 the first time around. But I will persist until I pass..." (Focus groups with over-age learners.)

"The teacher was always shouting at me telling me I'm too old for the grade." (Youth Survey.)

## DISPELLING MYTHS ABOUT REPETITION

- Repeating a grade is not simply an indicator that a learner has not mastered the school curriculum. International research shows that the poor learning outcomes of learners who have repeated are often an indicator of poverty (as described in the table).
- Research suggests that in poorly performing schools (which serve mainly black learners due to South Africa's history), progressing through the grades is not necessarily linked to a learner's actual learning ability. This is because teachers are not necessarily equipped to accurately assess whether or not learners should advance through to the next grades (Lam, D, Ardington, C. & Leibbrandt, M. *Schooling as a Lottery, Working Papers 56, ERSA, UCT, 2007*).
- Although grade repetition might improve learner achievement in the grade they are repeating (because they are studying the same curriculum for the second time) it does not necessarily improve their knowledge or understanding in a way which will help them achieve in the following grades (Brophy, J. *Grade Repetition, Education Policy Series, No. 6, UNESCO, 2006*).

## WHAT MIGHT HELP TO REDUCE LEVELS OF GRADE REPETITION?

While there are no simple solutions to preventing grade repetition, there are 'supporting interventions' that can be provided within the school environment and at home that would improve learners' chances of progressing in school.

### What can government do?

- **Focus on prevention and early interventions:** improve access to Early Childhood Development programmes especially for children from poverty-stricken households. Focus on developing core numeracy and literacy skills in the Foundation phase of schooling.
- **Support ABET programmes for caregivers:** caregivers who are better educated are in a better position to support their children academically.
- **Teacher education:** provide guidance for teachers to identify learners with special educational needs and learning disabilities.
- Investigate the link between home language, language of instruction and repetition and how this plays out in the South African classroom and promote multilingualism in schools.

### What can principals and educators do?

- Ensure that teachers are able to identify learners with special education needs and learning difficulties.
- **Monitor learners who are struggling academically:** offer supplementary in-class teaching, and additional tutoring out of normal class time, if necessary.
- Treat over-age learners and those learners who have repeated as an asset to the school, not a hindrance. Engage over-age learners creatively, in leadership positions (*in sports and other areas for example*), to increase their sense of engagement in school.

### What can parents and caregivers do?

- Talk to children and youth about their experience of school, their teachers and other aspects of their school life.
- Support children in developing other areas and talents, apart from academic work. This could include sport and art offered at school, or local youth and community centres. This, in turn, can help build children's confidence in their school work.



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

- **Support to learners:** provide drop-in centres after school to support learners with homework, tutoring programmes and extra-curricular activities.
- **Support to caregivers:** provide parenting programmes, adult (basic) education and training (e.g. English courses) – there is a strong connection between parental education, language and repetition.
- **Support to schools:** provide programmes that improve the skills of educators - particularly their ability to diagnose and support learners with learning difficulties.



## EXPERIENCES FROM THE FIELD

MaAfrika Tikkun runs youth centres in Gauteng and the Western Cape, offering homework supervision, skills development, psychological support, peer leadership programmes, sports etc.

[www.maafrikatikkun.org.za](http://www.maafrikatikkun.org.za)

Penreach offers school development programmes:

[www.penreach.org.za](http://www.penreach.org.za)

IkamvaYouth provides support to learners in senior grades:

[www.ikamvayouth.org](http://www.ikamvayouth.org)

SHAWCO offers an "All Round Tutoring Education programme:

[www.shawco.org](http://www.shawco.org)

## RELATED LINKS

Social Surveys:

[www.socialsurveys.co.za](http://www.socialsurveys.co.za)

Department of Basic Education:

[www.education.gov.za](http://www.education.gov.za)

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Knowledge is power. But understanding is everything.