



Evaluating School (in)effectiveness at Selected Underperforming High Schools in Amathole District, Eastern Cape

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Abstract: School effectiveness is a dynamic concept in which schools are understood to be either moving toward greater effectiveness or deteriorating in performance. This study investigated the factors that affect school effectiveness, focusing on leadership and infrastructural resources in underperforming schools from the Amathole District in the Eastern Cape province, South Africa. It employed a mixed methodology that included questionnaires and interviews with a sample of the key stakeholders of four Amathole West high schools. The researchers purposely selected four underperforming secondary schools in the Amathole West education district and used convenience sampling to gather input from 16 parents, 12 educators, and 4 Education District Officers (EDOs). The qualitative data was analysed thematically, while for the quantitative data, the researchers used descriptive statistics to summarize the data. The study findings highlight that poor leadership and management have a severe negative impact on academic success and school effectiveness. For instance, responses from the school principals highlighted how teacher absence and negligence correlate with poor education outcomes. Teacher unions have negatively influenced accountability, as the dominant union prevents school management from holding educators responsible for ensuring quality teaching and learning. While most School Government Bodies (SGBs) are non-functional due to members' illiteracy, resulting in an inability to hold principals and educators accountable, leading to dysfunctionality and underperformance. Finally, a shortage of infrastructure was found to limit the curriculum opportunities available to learners in rural schools. Without intervention, these already underperforming schools will likely deteriorate to dismal performance and functionality. The study recommends improvements in school management, parental, and community cohesion and a review of the funding model for underprivileged schools. The study's limitation is that it did not explore all the aspects of school effectiveness, a gap which future research could address for a more comprehensive understanding of the topic.

Keywords: School Effectiveness, School Leadership, Learner Underperformance, Amathole District, Eastern Cape

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1. Introduction

Schools can build educated individuals capable of taking responsibility and contributing to the larger community. However, not all school experiences can guarantee positive educational and social outcomes. The theory of School Effectiveness holds that improving specific school factors associated with student learning outcomes can cause learners to achieve academic performances that exceed statistical expectations and offset the impact of a student's family background (Javornik and Klemenčič Mirazchiyski, 2023). This is called the 'school effect.' By investing in certain school factors, such as leadership, resources and student readiness, among others, schools can provide high-quality and impartial education to all students, irrespective of their family's resources. This idea of the school effect contradicts the prominent 1966 Coleman report that largely saw learners' comparative achievement potential as predetermined by family, class and socio-economic status.

Schools in South Africa are considered to be ineffective. The government had hoped that democracy would lead to improved education, lifting learners out of intergenerational poverty and reducing the number of people dependent on government social grants. This, in turn, would help the country's economy grow. Yet, despite some advances, significant inequalities persist in public schools between different racial groups, leading to poor educational outcomes for the many within the system. South Africa has a dual education system that favours children who have access to financial and socio-cultural capital with excellent learning resources, while poor children attend schools that relentlessly suffer from resource neglect. Many of these schools lack the basic school infrastructure required for teaching and learning. The situation is particularly dire in the Eastern Cape province, where most rural schools in historically disadvantaged areas lack the necessary resources and basic infrastructure. As a result, the Eastern Cape consistently delivers lower matric pass rates and a higher proportion of dysfunctional schools.

According to Kiral (2020), schools are not static organisations but are constantly moving and becoming more or less effective. The direction of this movement depends on a school's resources, teachers and learners' capability (Kiral, 2020).

This research paper is based on a study of selected underperforming high schools in the Amathole District of the Eastern Cape. Underperforming and school effectiveness may be defined differently but relate to the achievements of the learners. As such, each influence and may, therefore, be studied in relation to the other. Rafique, Rehman and Rahman (2025) identified several critical characteristics of effective schools, including high expectations for student success and teacher support, cooperative leadership, a safe environment, positive home-school relations and parental involvement. The progress of learners at effective schools tends to be frequently monitored and the results are used to improve performance. But, as Kiral (2020) notes, if no concerted effort is made to make a school effective or maintain it once it has become effective, it will likely deteriorate further into ineffectiveness and negatively impact learner performance.

This study investigated the underlying factors that influence school effectiveness in the selected schools, including leadership and infrastructural resources. Understanding the underlying factors affecting school performance in poorer communities could assist the government to prioritise its expenditure of money and resources on improving schools, informing curriculum changes, encouraging focused interventions to

improve quality at schools and re-evaluating the effectiveness of the school resourcing model for basic education.

The study sought to address the research question: What are the factors that contribute to the underperformance of selected secondary schools in the Amathole West education district, Eastern Cape? The objectives of the study include identifying the factors that influence grade repetition and drop-out rates in underperforming schools, examining the relationship between school performance and external factors in the surrounding environment, investigating the roles of school management and governing bodies in underperforming schools, and evaluating the effectiveness of policies and interventions implemented in these schools.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Theory of School Effectiveness

The early developers of the theory of school effectiveness, Scheerens and Creemers (1989), identified three levels of school effectiveness, namely, management and leadership at the school level, teachers' preparedness at the classroom level and learners' learning readiness at the individual level (Kiral, 2020). The theory of school effectiveness proposes that the various factors or levels mentioned above can not only account for the differences in outcomes between different schools but improving these school factors would improve overall school performance and operations. For example, in the theory of school effectiveness, leadership quality has a direct link to school and individual outcomes. Schools require effective leaders and managers who can provide and drive the best possible education for their learners (Burkett & Hayes, 2023). Therefore, schools without competent leaders and management are expected to underperform and be less effective. Moreover, learning readiness comprises "learner readiness" and "teacher preparedness". Learner readiness refers to learners having both the desire and the capacity to learn; in other words, possessing the will and the skill to learn. Teacher preparedness refers to teachers who have not only the will and the skill to teach but who can adapt their skills to meet the needs of their students (Kiral, 2020). The theory proposes a direct correlation between the preparedness of students and the level of teacher preparation, higher levels of which ultimately lead to better school effectiveness. The evidence of school readiness is often gauged or represented by the higher achievement scores of learners while low achievement scores can be attributed to the lack of readiness and preparedness by both learners and teachers (Kiral, 2020).

According to Teddlie and Reynolds (2000) and Wiliam and Thompson (2017), the theory of school effectiveness has evolved, with significant research contributing to its development. Initially, the focus was on input and output models that emphasised the role of school resources, such as per-pupil expenditure, in explaining school outcomes. The theory has evolved to incorporate context as a vital variable that contributes to school effectiveness. While this theory suggests that improving certain school factors will make schools more successful or effective, opposing arguments arose when researchers began comparing the achievements and effectiveness of secondary schools in different contexts. They found that adding the same inputs in low-income or underdeveloped contexts did not necessarily produce the same output found in a relatively higher-income or suburban school. These findings did not necessarily contradict the school effectiveness theory as the relevant context in education is the environment inside

and outside the school. The internal environment includes the infrastructure, culture and values whereas the external environment is the neighbourhood of the school, along with its challenges and privileges. The external environment also includes the home environments of the learners.

When applying this theory, it's important to keep in mind a few limitations. Discussions on school effectiveness typically take a top-down approach that does not always consider the insights of internal stakeholders, like teachers and parents, who can give valuable perspectives on the factors that contribute to effective schools (Kiral, 2020). Moreover, there seems to be fluidity in explaining the variables that account for effective or 'good' schools and contestation about which variables to include or exclude (Burušić, Babarović & Velić, 2016; Kiral, 2020). Finally, the theory of school effectiveness has generally been conceptualised and developed by Western authors in Europe and the USA (Edmonds, 1979; Scheerens, 1990; Scheerens & Creemers, 1989; Scheerens & Creemers, 1990) and the application of this theory in developing countries needs to be debated. Although valid, this possible limitation is largely accounted for when considering or adjusting for the 'context'. Also, the limitations of the theory of school effectiveness can be negated by the theory applicability in diverse educational contexts.

Although there is no precise definition of school effectiveness, certain factors are commonly associated with ineffective schools, such as leadership conflicts, poor performance and unsafe school environments (Rafique, Rehman & Rahman, 2025). In this paper, school effectiveness is associated with several related factors, including teacher and student readiness (both proxied by schools' performance in examinations), infrastructure resources, leadership and household factors (the learner's home context).

2.2 Evaluating the South African Education System

The performance of the South African education system is evaluated against the dictates of the theory of school effectiveness. A chorus of scholars have heavily criticised the state of the South African public education system. Some researchers point to the dismal performance of SA learners in various international and national assessments (Moses, Van der Berg & Rich, 2017) while others believe the root causes of the malaise lie in a lack of accountability and inadequate resources. Several differing perspectives are explored below. The National School Effectiveness Study (NSES) examined the contextual factors impacting educational achievement in South African primary schools using a nationally representative sample of 268 schools (with the exception of Gauteng province). Based on the data, Taylor (2011) discovered several indicators of effective school management and teacher practice that are associated with student achievement, even within the significant portion of the educational system that has traditionally been disadvantaged and is presently experiencing low performance.

2.2.1 Capacity or Accountability

Spaull (2019) notes that the primary arguments of those examining the root causes of the deficient state of education in South Africa tend to consider capacity or accountability. The capacity argument posits that schools require more training, support and resources to function effectively. In other words, there is a material/ quantifiable resource deficit in public school provisioning. Spaull (2015) found that most learning deficits and educational outcomes in South Africa can be attributed to lack of capacity of the principals and teachers.

In contrast, the accountability argument suggests that monitoring, incentives and assessments should be enhanced to ensure optimal performance. This line of argument suggests that South African schools may have sufficient resources, but there are deficiencies in their stewardship and effective use. Supporting the accountability argument, Mlachila and Moeletsi (2019) argue that the budgets allocated to basic education in the country are sufficient and proportionally similar to developed OECD countries, yet poorer countries with much fewer resources still outperform South Africa. The problems facing schools go beyond inadequate resources and infrastructure. Numerous common issues related to accountability exist in the South African context, such as teacher absenteeism, inadequate curriculum coverage, and lack of information on accountability. According to Spull (2015), a notable indication of a significant lack of accountability in the education system is the weak connection between higher spending and enhanced educational results.

According to Mlachila and Moeletsi (2019), South African teachers are not held accountable for the academic performance of their learners. Glewwe and Muralidharan (2016) assert that a high rate of educator absenteeism contributes to poor school and educator governance in developing countries. In South Africa, teachers rarely have to account for high absenteeism and low content knowledge as they enjoy the protection of vocal teachers' unions (Mlachila & Moeletsi, 2019). This over-involvement of unions in the teaching process has frustrated many principals, who describe them as interfering with the running of schools (Bantwini & Moorosi, 2023). Wills (2015) notes that union involvement and strict labour relations laws and regulations not only impact performance management by principals but make it difficult to dismiss or sanction educators. Since the mandate of the school principal is to facilitate order, supervise staff and ensure adherence to and completion of the curriculum, overreaching unions compromise the leadership role of school principals. Despite finding positive impacts, Msila (2022) noted that several research studies conducted on teacher unions in South Africa have demonstrated how teacher strikes disrupt school programs and have a detrimental effect on student achievement.

As managers, principals cannot hold teachers accountable through the payment structure, which is determined by a national bargaining council (Mlachila & Moeletsi, 2019). Salaries are determined by qualifications, experience and seniority levels (e.g. a head of department earns more than an ordinary teacher). Teachers are paid according to a fixed scale with an automatic annual pay progression, 13th cheque and considerable benefits from the employer, in addition to union-negotiated cost-of-living increases. These payments do not act as monetary incentives to work well. Because it is not linked to performance, their remuneration does not necessarily incentivise teachers to strive for greater performance, knowledge and expertise. Another barrier to accountability is that teachers often resist monitoring and accountability measures because they view the development of these measures, as well as certain reform initiatives, as undemocratic and exclusionary. Further, since the national Department of Basic Education (DBE) creates policies, reforms and interventions without consulting teachers and principals, and they are obligated to comply, they may not feel accountable for decisions that they had not made input into (Bantwini & Moorosi, 2023). Spull (2019) concludes that the most viable solution is to combine providing additional resources and support with increasing accountability.

2.2.2 Low Quality: Low performance

It has been observed that inadequate academic performance is not evenly distributed among different ethnicities and household incomes. A staggering 80% of South Africa's underperforming schools are located in impoverished townships and rural areas (Mlachila & Moeletsi, 2019). Learners in poorer schools are disadvantaged by poverty and prevented from achieving upward social mobility through education. According to Pretorius and Klapwijk's (2016) study, teachers in lower-performing Quintiles 1–3 schools tend to read less and own fewer books than their counterparts in more prosperous Quintiles 4–5 schools¹. The research revealed that teachers' reading habits significantly impact effective literacy instruction and learners' acquisition of literacy skills.

The vast knowledge and performance gaps between learners of different income quintiles start to develop at a young age and widen subsequently (Moses et al., 2017). These gaps manifest during schooling in high grade repetition and dropout rates and failure to meet university admission criteria. Poor access to tertiary education leads to poor labour market outcomes. Schools with larger numbers of Black and low-income students have noticeably lower levels of teacher job satisfaction and are more likely to experience a high staff turnover (Grissom, 2011). At first glance, and despite the link between economic disadvantage and low school outcomes, the matric (Grade 12²) pass rates have considerably improved since the 1990s. From 2001, the national matric pass rate rose to 61,7% and has risen almost every year since (82,9% in 2023). According to Taylor (2009), the increased matric pass rates mask the manipulation of the results through various methods. These include preventing high-risk candidates from taking the exam, encouraging candidates to register for the easier standard grade level and lowering standards by simplifying the examination papers.

In addition, research has revealed socioeconomic disparities and systemic inequities underlying academic underachievement, particularly in relation to socioeconomic factors. Maswikiti (2008) found that children from families with high socioeconomic status (SES) and high quality of education scored better on the academic performance than those from low SES families with low quality education. The research also found an interaction between SES and quality of education, with low SES children with high quality education scoring significantly better on academic performance. The findings showcase how low SES and poor quality of education is a reality amongst majority of South African learners. Taylor and Yu (2009) found that the relationship between SES and education exhibits a circular pattern, as it is widely acknowledged that a student's SES significantly impacts their educational attainment.

2.2.3 The state of South African school infrastructure

According to Reggio Emilia's approach to education, three educators are always present in the classroom: the teacher, the child and the environment (Strong-Wilson & Ellis, 2007). The class environment is integral

¹ South African public schools are funded according to a quintile-based funding system. The lowest, Quintile 1, comprise the 20% of the schools managed by the DBE that it defines as located in the poorest communities. Quintile 5 schools are in the most economically advantaged communities. The government funding allocation per learner is highest for Quintile 1 and lowest for Quintile 5.

² The National Senior Certificate (NSC).

for stimulating learning and can enhance or limit how well content is taught, depending on the resources and equipment available. For instance, Bantwini (2017) investigated how natural science and technology are taught in the Eastern Cape. According to Bantwini (2017), there is a lack of space, learning resources and basic infrastructure (including insufficient desks and chairs) in many schools in the province. Schools are overcrowded, which negatively impacts the teacher's ability to oversee the class and identify struggling learners. Overall, the paper concludes that technology and natural science teaching occur in an intellectually unstimulating environment, making these subjects tedious and confusing. Ironically, while the South African government promotes Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM) subjects to learners and teachers, most schools lack the high-quality equipment and school infrastructure that these subjects require to be effectively taught.

In 2010, several private organisations sued the Eastern Cape provincial government on behalf of seven so-called 'mud schools. Mud schools lack structural integrity being constructed largely of mud and wattle, and are often in poor condition, even in some cases, missing the roof (Skelton, 2014). They often lack running water and sanitation. Given the limitations of the building materials, mud schools tend to be small structures which, in KwaZulu-Natal, is associated with overcrowding (Khumalo & Mji, 2014). A more serious infrastructural problem has been the continued use of pit latrines, which has led to horrific consequences. In 2014, five-year-old Michael Komape drowned in his school's pit toilet, which resulted in the family suing the DBE (Draga, 2017). Despite this, in August 2020, Education Minister Angie Motshekga admitted in Parliament that more than 3 800 schools still used pit latrines (Felix, 2020). In 2015, the DBE released national data showing that 77% of ordinary public schools did not have stocked libraries, 86% did not have laboratory facilities and 12% did not have reliable electricity (Draga, 2017). These infrastructure deficits present health and safety risks to teachers and learners such as being exposed to inclement weather and missing school due to catching colds and flu. The learning and teaching materials in the class are also prone to weather damage (Skelton, 2014).

The impact of school infrastructure in South Africa, specifically the insufficiency of facilities and the presence of unsafe learning environments, has a significant effect on educational outcomes. This issue is clearly addressed in academic literature, as Mokgwathi, Graham, and de Villiers (2023) have emphasized the increasing concern surrounding the inadequate infrastructure in South African schools, which ultimately results in unsafe conditions for both teachers and students. These findings underscore the pressing necessity for addressing the state of school infrastructure promptly.

3. Methods

This study was a mixed-methods study. Complementing the qualitative nature of the interviews and in-depth discussion, quantitative data allowed for measurement and objective comparison. The Eastern Cape is largely rural and characterised by extreme levels of unemployment and illiteracy (ECDOE, 2015). The research study was conducted in the Amathole West education district, which falls within the boundaries of the Amathole District Municipality in the central part of the Eastern Cape. Most of the worst-performing education districts in the province, including Amathole West, are in the eastern part of the province (Hompasshe, 2018). The researchers purposively selected four secondary schools out of the 59 schools in the Amathole West education district that underperformed in the 2018 final NSC examinations. Convenience sampling was used to sample parents, educators and Education District Officers (EDOs). In

the Eastern Cape province, Amathole West constituted 62% of schools that obtained a matric pass rate below 60% in 2018 and were thus considered underperforming. According to Onwuegbuzie and Collins (2007), convenience (also known as availability) sampling is a strategy where research participants are selected based on their availability. Two of the four schools are located in a township (semi-urban), one is in a rural area, and one is in an urban area. The sample frame comprised principals, EDOs from the Amathole West education district, educators and parents. Parents were recruited through local and traditional authorities. Most educators were recruited through parents, particularly those who were SGB members, local authorities, and one principal who provided educators' contact details. In all, in addition to four EDOs, four principals, 12 educators and 16 parents were selected from the four schools. This study, including the methodology, was approved by the Humanities and Social Science Research Ethics Committee of the University of the Western Cape. Ethical clearance was also obtained from the ECDOE, including permission to approach the selected schools. The researcher obtained consent from the Amathole West district director. Participants were provided with information and consent forms, with verbal consent granted before interviews. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained, with research records accessible only to the researcher and participants and schools not identified by their names.

Data collection for the study was initially planned for face-to-face interaction. However, due to COVID-19 and social distancing requirements, the study had to rely on e-interviews, videoconferencing, text messages, and telephone interviews. This approach endured some constraints as the Eastern Cape being an impoverished province faces technology limitations.

The researcher used three questionnaires for principals, educators, and parents, along with an interview schedule for EDOs. The questionnaires focused on school profile, personal profile, human resource management, staff management, curriculum management, and governance. The educator questionnaires addressed school leadership and educators' experiences. Parents' questionnaires sought their views on school involvement. The questionnaires were distributed via email and telephone, with inferential and descriptive statistical analysis used to make conclusions about the relationships between population variables. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the data and quantitative analysis employed to explain the interrelatedness of school-level and out-of-school factors and their relevance to secondary school performance.

4. Findings

Different school-level and out-of-school-level factors were found to influence the educational attainment of learners. The school-level factors include leadership, safety and curriculum management. Out of school factors include the poor socio-economic conditions in the areas in which schools are located, together with high school drop-out rates, which creates a breeding ground for criminality among adolescents. Also, the involvement of township youth in criminal activities and gangsterism as opposed to education makes it easier for them to drop out of the school system, particularly learners who only receive motivation from parents and guardians. The study findings include:

- The academic performance in the area of study is highly influenced by score/grade inflation and the grade promotion/ progression policy.

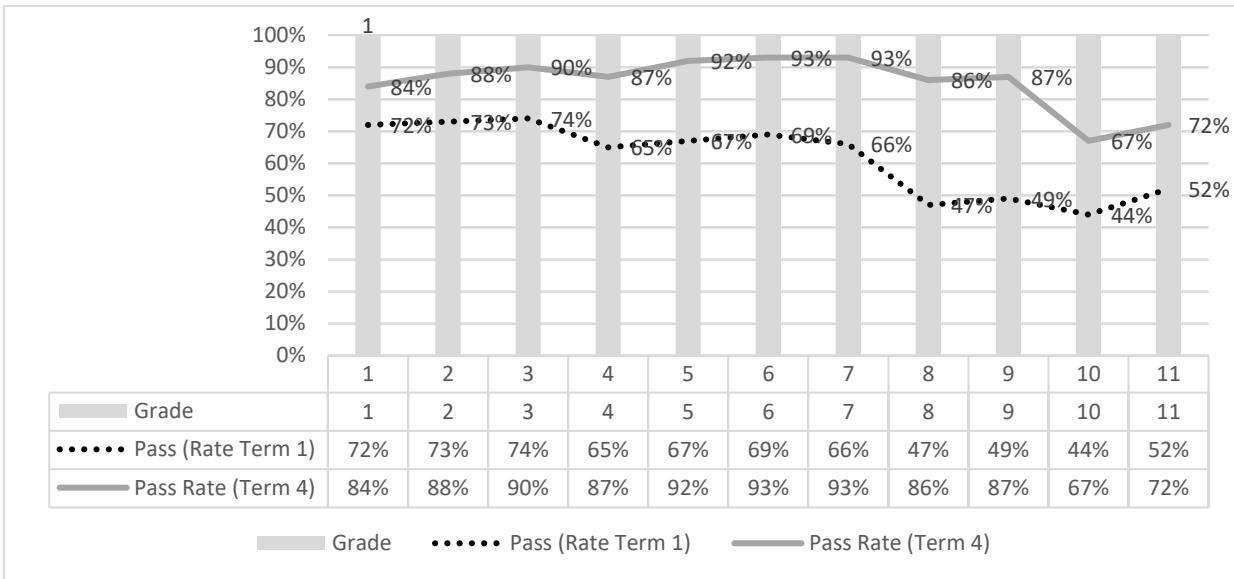


Figure 1: Term 1 and Term 4 pass rate comparison, Grade 1 to 11

Source: Primary data

The graph shows the massive gap between term one and term four pass rates, in every grade. Term four results determine whether learners are promoted to the next grade or will repeat the grade. For instance, in Grade 8, there is a massive gap; about 39% more students were promoted to the following grade at the end of the fourth term than had passed in term one. The gaps between the two terms are more significant in the higher grades but since all the gaps are high, it is unlikely that they can be accounted for by academic improvement alone but indicate score/grade inflation. Most of the work done in South Africa on score/grade inflation has been on Grade 12. Prince and Msemburi (2014) define score/grade inflation as occurring when scores/marks in examinations significantly increase without an improvement in underlying ability. Prince and Msemburi (2014) found that yearly increases in NSC scores are too significant to be accounted for by increased student ability. Instead, the increase can only be explained by grade inflation. In other words, scores are inflated to make candidates reflect a better performance than suggested by their actual ability. One consequence of this practice is that such learners experience a dramatic decline in marks when they move to tertiary education. Tewari and Ilesanmi (2020) argue that grade inflation is strongly influenced by the pressure on stakeholders, including the government, to deliver better pass rates.

Equally interesting is that the pass rates in the foundation phase (Grades 1 to 3) are very high and contradict the findings of empirical studies showing that a high proportion of learners in the foundation phase are unable to read, write and do basic numeracy. For instance, in the international PIRLS study, four out of five Grade 4 children in South Africa could not read for meaning in any language (Hall, 2023). International practice, according to the educational literature generally discourages grade repetition and leans more towards automatic promotion, especially in the foundation phase. The South African government adopted the grade promotion/ progression policy in 2013, which discourages learners spending more than four years in a phase and limits repetition to “one year per school phase, where

necessary.” The challenge with automatic promotion is that, if there are no interventions, learners carry their early knowledge deficit into high school where they may not cope. Consequently, pass rates decline from Grade 8, as depicted in the graph above. It should be noted that pass rates only include learners who attended and would be even lower if learners who dropped out were counted as failures in a given year.

- The highest prevalence of school underperformance in the Eastern Cape province in 2018 was in the Amathole West District.

The DBE defines underperforming schools as those with a Grade 12 pass rate below 60%. Below is the proportion of schools in the province that obtained a matric pass rate below 60% in 2018 and were thus labelled as underperforming.

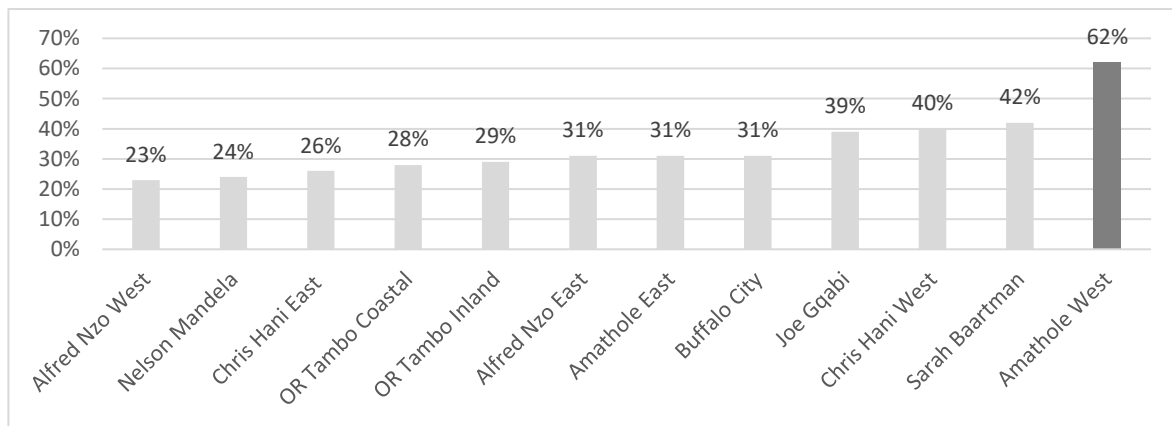


Figure 2: Grade 12 Underperforming Schools in the Eastern Cape by District (2018)

Source: Primary data from the ECDOE, 2018.

Overall, about 313 schools underperformed in the province in 2018. A significant proportion (62%) of the schools having less than a 60% matric pass rate was in the Amathole West District. Again, had learners who did not take the exam for various reasons (illness, bereavement, pregnancy, dropout, death, incarceration) been included, the NSC failure rate in Amathole West would likely have been even higher. This can be associated with the low socioeconomic profile of the region. Amathole is a drought-stricken district with high levels of poverty, poor service delivery, high unemployment and low levels of economic development (Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs, 2020).

- The schools under study became less effective over time due to both school level and out of school level factors.

The study included one rural, two semi-urban and one urban school. Various factors influenced performance in these schools, including leadership, safety, curriculum management, poverty, parental involvement and crime.

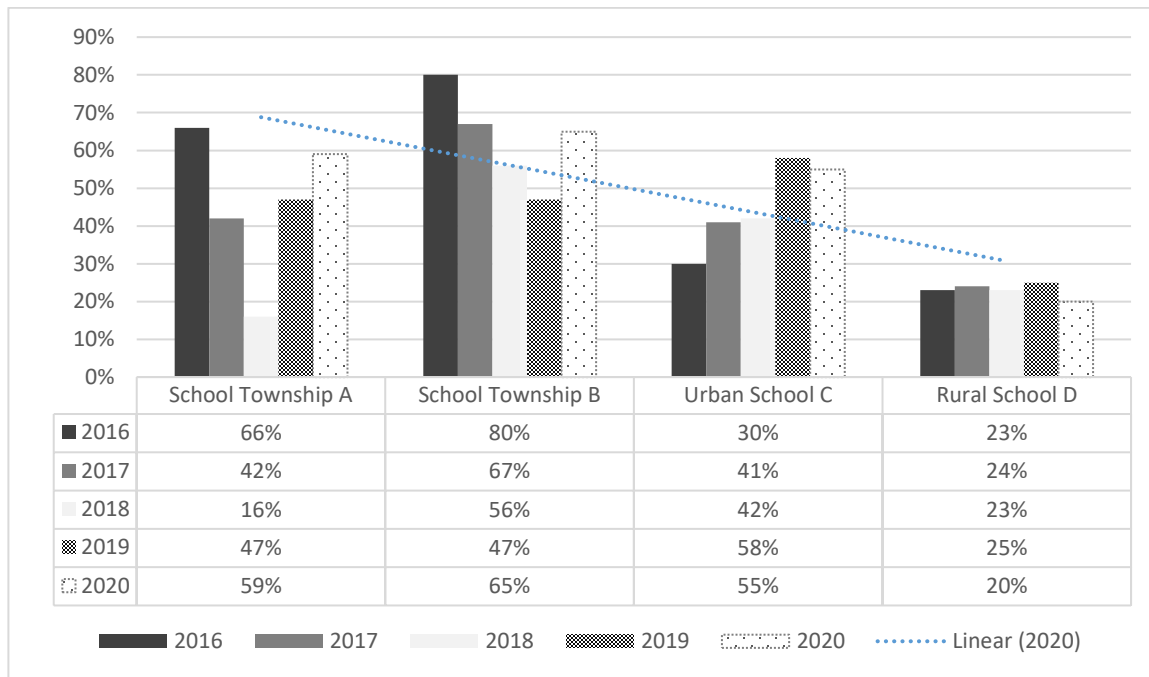


Figure 3: Matric Pass Rates in Selected Schools in Amathole West District, 2016–2020

Source: Primary data from the ECDOE, 2018.

Burušić et al. (2016) suggest that measuring the learners' achievement between two points in time is a crucial criterion for evaluating educational effectiveness. The four schools chosen for this study were among the underperforming schools of 2018 when the highest matric pass rate was 56% and the lowest was a mere 16%. After that, schools B and C steadily improved, albeit off a low base, and school A markedly improved. However, the same cannot be said about Rural School D. The rural school has been stuck in its failure, only managing to pass a quarter of its matriculants in 2020. The school represented an outlier which exhibited persistent low performance throughout the study period despite efforts to improve. This is mostly likely due to the unique challenges faced by rural schools or systemic issues affecting educational outcomes in underserved communities. The trend is evident in South Africa where inadequate school facilities continue to be a problem. This is especially in rural areas where the enduring effects of the apartheid era resource disparities are still evident in the poor infrastructure in schools. Poor infrastructure has a detrimental effect on the quality of education, especially in rural educational settings. Thus, using 2016 and 2020 as two points, based on Burušić et al.'s (2016) telling marks of effectiveness, and considering that none of the schools beat their highest pass rate in 2020, it is concluded that the four schools are becoming less effective.

- The school level factors such as leadership and management account for the disparities in school effectiveness.

The level of leadership from principals and teachers was found to be inconsistent driving some of the challenges. In addition, SGBs were found to be generally dysfunctional, with mostly illiterate members

who lacked the necessary management skills to constitute an effective body. To remedy this, the study recommends providing training and capacity-building initiatives for SGB members to improve their management skills and understanding of their roles and responsibilities. Varying levels of school leadership and management, both essential determinants of school effectiveness, are provided by the principals, teachers, SGBs and EDOs.

4.1.1 Principals

Overall, the leadership from principals is inconsistent. The rural and urban schools have glaring leadership challenges. The rural school is barely functioning. The previous staff of the school was disbanded due to community politics, unions' influence and conflict management issues. The school has changed principals three times within three years, partly due to feelings of insecurity as a result of generally high crime levels. The current principal has been at the school for less than a year, in his first role as a principal. Although still facing challenges, the leaders of the urban school are optimistic and feel the school is making progress. The current principal has been in the position for three years during which the school saw some improvement in academic performance. The two township schools are struggling due to environmental issues that are often present in urban settings, such as crime, vandalism and poverty in their surrounding communities. The inconsistency of leadership impacts on staff morale, school performance and effectiveness.

4.1.2 Teachers

The teachers appear to lack good leadership qualities and do not lead by example, as evidenced by the problem of late coming to school by teachers. Three of the principals acknowledged that the attendance of educators was a challenge at their schools (the urban school seemed not to have issues with attendance). From the responses received, it was noted that disciplinary action was not being taken against educators. The results showed that about 92% of the educators admitted struggling with late coming while 8% claimed they were never late.

“Educators are always late and sometimes they attend their personal problems during school time.” – Educator

While schools are known to address educator negligence informally during school meetings, hoping they would change their behaviour, one principal indicated that a different, more direct approach was needed to improve attendance and enforce accountability for late coming as these problems severely affected the functioning of the school. It was noted, however, that poor attendance and punctuality were also observed in the wider Eastern Cape and other areas. Du Plessis and Mestry (2019) found that in mostly rural provinces such as the Eastern Cape, district officials visit schools less often, which can create a less professional and uncaring environment for teaching staff. No educational support is forthcoming from the communities either, which largely consist of less educated, elderly individuals who lack the confidence and knowledge to challenge the authority of teachers. Consequently, they do not actively monitor teachers and do not prioritise education. Finally, schools located in rural areas typically struggle to attract highly qualified and motivated teachers, as the top candidates often decline to work in isolated environments that lack social, professional and cultural opportunities (Du Plessis & Mestry, 2019). In terms of development,

the Eastern Cape still lacks basic road, water and sanitation infrastructure and has inadequate health facilities and internet connectivity. There is need to addressing teacher attendance issues. Some of the recommendations for addressing the attendance and punctuality challenges among teachers include implementing stricter disciplinary measures or offering professional development opportunities to improve teacher motivation and commitment.

4.1.3 Roles of SGBs at selected schools

When principals were asked whether SGBs were functional in their schools, the researcher discovered that SGBs were only actively involved in one of the four schools studied. Three SGBs were non-functional, with mostly illiterate members who lacked the necessary management skills to ensure a functional body.

“Majority of SGB members are illiterate and sometimes they do not attend meetings and workshops due to fear of vulnerability and that their level of education will be exposed.”
– Principal

Another principal noted:

“Our treasurer has educational qualification that is lower than Grade 6 and yet expected to fulfil such a crucial function.”

It was evident that principals did not feel supported by the SGBs and believed that the SGBs did not perform their mandated duties satisfactorily. The educators echoed the concerns of the principals regarding the SGBs.

Seventy-five percent of the educators mentioned that some parents were reluctant to participate in the SGB and school activities due to low levels of education and the language barriers caused by the SGB training material, which was only available in English. Members often had to rely on principals and educators to explain the material. Moreover, educators felt poorly supported by the SGB, particularly concerning poor learner performance and misbehaviour. One educator alleged that the SGB was not present to assist them with disciplinary issues while another alluded to conflicts of interest because some parent governors were using their positions to appoint their preferred educators without necessarily checking whether their skills matched the needs of the schools.

An EDO also noted this conflict of interest which ultimately hindered the school’s performance.

“In some cases, principals are bullied into employing educators that do not meet the needs of the school at the time. As a former educator, I see this as an issue. Low pass rate of students at schools cannot be attributed to principals and educators only but to the school governance and management as well together with individual efforts put by learners.” –
EDO

The respondents were adamant that some of the reasons the selected schools were not performing could be attributed to the irresponsible and wrong decisions made by SGBs to employ bad and inexperienced educators. The study recommends strengthening the functionality of School Governing Bodies (SGBs),

such as providing training and capacity-building initiatives for SGB members to improve their management skills and understanding of their roles and responsibilities.

4.1.4 Parents' perceptions of SGBs

Parents were asked if they participated in the SGB and only three (18,75%) parents were part of the SGB. A parent governor explained:

“Yes, we do get involved in school decision-making but not to the full extent. Principals sometimes do not give us opportunities to be part of making school decisions but rather he takes decisions with his Deputy and HOD.”

One parent, who was a member of the SGB, highlighted an erroneous change in management when the school curriculum was changed to that of a science school and some of the Grade 10 learners were forced to change from commerce subjects to science, amid concerns that some might not be able to cope with the curriculum. During the interviews, one of the parents noted that they had been afraid to raise their concerns about the governance of the school due to the fear of their children being potentially victimised.

Most parents also said that they tend to agree with and accept any decision taken by their SGBs even though some decisions do not always benefit the schools or their children. In one instance, an SGB member disagreed with the way a change of curriculum was implemented at her school but did not have the support to challenge it. The study proposes strategies for increasing parental involvement in SGBs and school activities such as addressing language barriers in training materials and fostering a supportive environment where parents feel empowered to participate in decision-making processes. The study acknowledges the concerns raised by parents regarding their involvement in SGBs and decision-making processes at schools. We recommend transparent communication channels and opportunities for meaningful parent engagement to address parental fears and build trust between parents, school leadership, and SGB members.

4.1.5 District Support by EDOs

None of the officials was specific about the frequency of their visits to the schools which appeared to occur on an as-and-when basis. When asked what their visits entailed, none of the respondents could clearly outline how the role of the district office was discharged at the selected schools. The onus seemed to be solely placed on principals, parents and educators to request involvement. Three principals flatly denied that they had ever had visits from the district and expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of visibility of officials at their schools and their perceived inability to promptly respond to issues at the schools.

“As it stands, the district is not supporting at all and there seems to be no interest by the district to support the schools. Perhaps, the district can support if the national government can enforce it...My school did not have water and electricity for three months due to the Eskom bill that amounted to R160 000 and as such schools' activities for other grades were discontinued. Educators and teachers are unable to use the toilets or charge laptops. As it stands the school's alumni is in the process of raising the funds to assist with the issue, but the district is nowhere to be found.”– Principal A4

The study recommends community engagement strategies for increasing community engagement and support for education, particularly in rural areas where district officials visit schools less frequently. A recommendation could be the implementation of community outreach programs or partnerships with local stakeholders to promote a culture of education and accountability. We suggest the implementation of strict guidelines for district authorities to make regular visits to schools and offer prompt aid and resources to tackle pressing matters affecting education.

4.2 Infrastructure/Resources

- The shortage of infrastructure limits the curriculum opportunities available to learners in rural schools. The respondents were asked to rate the availability of the key infrastructural resources.

Table 1: Availability of Resources

Resource	Adequate	Inadequate	Not Available
Learning Material	X	XXX	
Computer Laboratory			XXXX
Library	X	X	XX
School Hall	X	X	XX
Administrative Block	XX	XX	
Sports Field	X	XX	X
Toilets	XX	X	X

Source: Primary Data

The Xs represent the frequency of schools that fell into each category. For instance, for learning material, one school denoted by X indicated to have "adequate" resources, while three denoted by XXX mentioned to have inadequate resources. Resources such as learning materials (textbooks), computer laboratories and libraries are necessary for curriculum delivery, which ultimately influences learners' academic performance. For instance, a functional library is perceived as providing a reading and study environment, particularly for learners without dedicated study facilities at home.

“The library is available in the area in which the school is located however there are no books, and this contributes to the challenge of improving learner performance at the school. This means that the library is not fully resourceful to the community it was servicing.” –
Principal A1

Similarly, the lack of computers at the selected schools hampers the quality of teaching and learner performance. Learners had no opportunity to access computers and the internet at school and were, therefore, being denied access to standard tools of education delivery that were vital to ensure a quality education.

A shortage of infrastructure limits the curriculum opportunities available to learners in rural schools. They have fewer electives like art and computers, and there are fewer advanced placement offerings (Du Plessis & Mestry, 2019). Unfortunately, learners are not always able to choose subjects that align with their abilities due to the limitations of the school's resources.

“The school is over 100 years, and the buildings are old and need renovations. The department is not forthcoming in assisting with renovations which would assist in create adequate staffrooms for staff.” – Principal A4

Based on the findings, the research advocates for enhanced district backing to cater to the requirements of schools, especially in regions with inadequate infrastructure and resources.

- Contextual factors impact on emotional and physical safety which in turn impacts academic performance.

Emotional and physical safety are highly linked to academic performance. In a related study, Ncontsa and Shumba (2013) studied the nature, causes and effects of school violence in four South African high schools and found that there was a high prevalence of corporal punishment, gangsterism, indiscipline, intolerance, and bullying in schools. The study also discovered that students who experienced school violence had sadness, poor academic performance, loss of focus, and class skipping. As a result, learners who are involved in substance abuse tend to be regularly absent from classes, perform poorly and ultimately drop out. Three of the selected schools were in impoverished areas characterised by extreme crime and substance abuse. The principals felt unsafe at the schools. When asked why they felt unsafe, one of the principals indicated that the school lacked computers after incidents of theft and vandalism at the school. Theft and vandalism were commonplace and normalised in their areas. The lack of security was evident at one solidly constructed but frequently vandalised school that had many broken windows. Two educators (16,7%) indicated that their schools were regularly vandalised, six (50%) indicated that their schools were sometimes vandalised while four (33,3%) indicated that their schools were never vandalised.

“The school has no security, the man you see at the gate is a handyman who leaves at four. The alarm system is not functional, only the administration building has alarm system. We had computers but were stolen due to lack of security system in some areas of the school.” – Principal A2

“The biggest challenge that we are facing is burglary and vandalism. Sometimes theft is done by the learners of the same schools. Our school does not have security personnel due to lack of funds.” – Principal A4

To address this issue, we recommend schools to educate learners, educators, and parents about school violence through seminars, workshops, and teamwork. They should encourage reporting, discipline bullying, inform parents and enforce suspension. More personnel should be employed to monitor school entrances. Furthermore, allocating resources towards security personnel, installing effective alarm systems, and enacting community policing strategies are essential measures to deter theft, vandalism, and substance abuse within school grounds. Additionally, fostering stronger partnerships between school

administrators, local law enforcement, and community members is crucial in safeguarding the welfare and security of both students and staff.

- The schools experience various dysfunctionalities resulting from the social environment in which they are located.

Two schools were not only located in a very poor area but serviced learners who were from disadvantaged backgrounds. The principals were asked to rate their household circumstances; three indicated that their learners were from poor homes while one rated them as coming from 'average' families. The finding is in alignment with international literature where Ferguson, Bovaird & Mueller (2007) found that persistent socioeconomic disadvantage has a negative impact on student behaviour, achievement and retention in school in Canadian children. Sustainable interventions, particularly those that monitor the effects of various child, family, and community factors on children's well-being, could lessen the effects.

- Substance abuse was found to affect academic performance where the principals also reported that some of their learners struggle with substance abuse.

“One time I saw one of the learners drunk while driving in the location and in this community, it is a norm for a child to drink.” – Principal A3

“...some learners are involved in alcohol abuse and parents are not aware of their behaviour due to lack of communication at home.” – Principal A4

Substance abuse among students is linked to poor academic performance, aggressive behaviour and violence. These findings align with earlier findings on high rates of academic failure and vandalism (Ongwae, 2016). Ongwae's study also found that students from low-income families are more likely to engage in drug abuse due to their social and economic circumstances. These students may turn to drug-abusing peers for support and survival. This research recommends campaigns to educate learners on the impact of substance use, align the contribution of parents and the family environment as mediators across socioeconomic contexts.

5. Discussion

The nature of school effectiveness is dynamic. It is a continuous process that requires ongoing intervention and improvement efforts. Schools are either moving towards effectiveness or deteriorating towards dismal performance. Without intervention, already underperforming schools will likely deteriorate in performance and functionality. The research conducted on underperforming secondary schools in the Amathole West education district revealed that ineffective leadership and management were having a severe negative impact on academic success and school effectiveness. It is apparent that the leaders at various levels of these schools are failing and there is a dire need for increased accountability, particularly of teachers. The input from school principals highlighted how teacher absence and negligence correlates with poor education outcomes. Best practices from effective schools include disciplinary action and hiring motivated teachers, though top candidates often decline to work in isolated environments that lack social, professional and cultural opportunities.

The gathered data and discussions with district officials and principals confirm that the education district officials rarely contact the schools except for periodically supporting schools during preparation for the Grade 12 NSC examinations. This narrow focus on improving matric pass rates puts the cart before the horse. High pass rates can only be achieved through a combination of accountable and competent teachers, effective school management and leadership, sufficient learning materials and resources, consistent parent support and a conducive and safe environment. This policy approach has implications on long-term educational outcomes and equity in access to quality education. The narrow focus on matric results without addressing the underlying resource challenges faced by schools will persist unless a more holistic approach to educational reform is pursued, one that prioritizes resource allocation and support for underperforming schools.

Teacher unions were found to be a negative influence at some schools as the dominant union was able to prevent school management from holding educators accountable for late-coming and absenteeism, which impact their roles in ensuring quality teaching and learning. The impacts can be negated by capacitating school principals and SGBs to appropriately and effectively address issues of negligence and absenteeism. Due to parents' lack of education and misunderstanding of their role in the SGBs, there was a governance deficit at the schools and, therefore, these parents rarely contribute to improving the schools. The researchers identified a lack of teaching and learning resources as one of the main contributors to underperformance at the selected schools. The finding aligns with Moses, Victor & John (2022) who studied the impact of resource allocation on learner achievements in public schools using the Limpopo province as a case study. In line with this study, they found that the allocation of school resources significantly influences learners' achievement, and recommended equal allocation of resources to improve educational outcomes. The schools lack adequate infrastructure, resources and learning materials for several reasons, including the lack of adequate provisioning by the government, the inadequacy of the quintile funding model to redress the legacy of unequal access to resources, poorly maintained amenities and buildings, the economic disadvantage of the surrounding communities and the impact on schools of poverty and crime.

These factors collectively disadvantage the schools and learners in the study and negatively impact learning and teaching. Among the consequences are:

- Learners are underprepared for examinations.
- The schools lack basic resources such as a library, computer laboratory and adequate supply of textbooks.
- The school environment is unsafe and vandalised classrooms are not environments conducive to quality teaching and learning.
- The schools are unable to secure the school property and safeguard the learners.
- The DBE is overly focused on the matric results produced by the schools without attempting to resolve the serious resource challenges faced by the schools.

As a result, the schools generally achieve poor education outcomes across the grades, including low pass rates and poor-quality passes.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

Following Rafique, Rehman and Rahman (2025) definition of school effectiveness, factors such as leadership conflicts, poor performance and unsafe school environments are associated with ineffective schools. In other words, if these factors are present in a school, the school can be regarded as ineffective. The lack of achievement in examinations is a consequence and proof of school ineffectiveness. The Amathole West District in South Africa experienced the highest school underperformance in 2018, largely due to its low socioeconomic status. The region faces challenges like drought, poverty, and high unemployment rates, which impact the effectiveness of its educational institutions. Issues like inconsistent leadership, dysfunctional SGBs, and inadequate infrastructure limit educational opportunities. Grade inflation and promotion policies also influence pass rates, leading to disparities in educational outcomes. The study showed that aspects of teacher and student readiness (both proxied by schools' performance in examinations), infrastructure resources, leadership and household factors negatively impacted the education outcomes achieved by the four schools. Equally, it is clear that, without seriously improving all these factors, the four schools cannot significantly improve their effectiveness.

In light of the findings, the following recommendations are presented;

- The government needs to urgently revisit and revise the quintile funding model and eradicate the causes of inadequate provisioning and infrastructure in economically disadvantaged schools and communities.
- Improve school management, parental involvement, and community cohesion.
- Encourage parents with useful skills and qualifications to stand for School Governing Body (SGB) elections.
- Clearly define the functions and scope of district support, especially for resources, training, and monitoring.
- Align district support with mutually agreed school development plans to ensure effectiveness.

This study did not explore all the aspects of school effectiveness, for example, the motivation of students and teachers, or consider the effect of their interrelatedness, a gap which future research could address for a more comprehensive understanding of the topic.

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