

'Overagedness an issue for SA learners'

By Angelique Serrao

The majority of children who stay in school are learning very little, a study into the access to schooling of South African children has found. The study is a part of a five-year research programme into educational access, transitions and equity, led by the Wits Education Policy Unit. The study looked at problems of dropouts, overagedness, and repetition by tracking pupils at school, shadowing classes and surveying parents' and learners' perceptions of schools and the education they are receiving. So far, 1 900 pupils have been tracked, 200 parents interviewed and 1 000 learner tests administered to assess numeracy skills.

The research, which was done in Gauteng and the Eastern Cape, saw that despite substantial improvements in both policy and practice, South Africa faced challenges in attendance and in grade progression, and was unsatisfactory in terms of age grade norms and in terms of quality learning outcomes.

"The most important finding is that while large numbers of learners persist in school, many of them suffer 'silent exclusion', being in classrooms but learning very little," said Dr Shireen Motala, a director at the Wits Education Policy Unit. Motala added: "Meaningful access to education is a dream for the vast majority of learners in South Africa."

Motala said this was because of the big issues in education, such as poor teacher quality and issues with the language of learning. A large part of the problem was the social circumstances children faced outside the school environment, she said. "Children come to school with a fair amount of disadvantages," Motala said. "You can see the poverty and the lack of nutrition in children." It was this poverty and lack of food which provoked erratic attendance and cognitive deficits in the children, the study found.

No-fee schools had gone a long way in addressing issues of access, but indirect costs like transport and school uniforms were a big burden on many households. "We need a holistic way of looking at children and education," according to Motala. "The social sector needs to work together with the Department of Education." Overagedness was also an issue. This had been solved partially by the age grade norm policy, but this meant many pupils who should repeat a grade were being allowed to progress to the next level.

Motala suggested policy changes that might help. These were: clarifying and making more consistent language policies; schools being more welcoming to community service; better-quality teaching; and tracking learner migration.

This article was published on page 2 of [The Star](#) on December 14, 2009.