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## Four critical causes of under-achievement in township secondary schools

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Underachievement is a problem that can affect every learner and no education institution is immune to it. Potential does not guarantee performance, therefore a student possessing the potential to achieve well in school must still work hard, otherwise s/he will not achieve according to that potential. This article examines four critical determinants of underachievement among township secondary school learners: media of instruction, overcrowding, truancy and shortages of textbooks. The study has found these factors to have a telling negative influence on learners' performance, which must be countered.

### Vier kritieke oorsake van onderprestasië in sekondêre skole in die townships

Onderprestasië is 'n probleem wat enige leerder kan raak en geen opvoedkundige instelling is immuun daarteen nie. Potensiaal waarborg nie prestasië nie, daarom moet 'n leerder met die potensiaal om goed op skool te presteer steeds hard werk, anders sal hy/sy nie ooreenkomstig dié potensiaal presteer nie. Hierdie artikel ondersoek die vier kritieke determinante van onderprestasië by leerders in sekondêre skole in die townships. Die invloed van die onderrigmedium, oorvolklaskamers, stokkiesdraaiery en 'n tekort aan handboeke op skolastiese prestasië is ondersoek. Die studie het bevind dat hierdie faktore 'n besliste en negatiewe invloed op leerderprestasië het wat besweer moet word.

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**U**nderachievement is a universal problem experienced in every educational institution. Every learner possesses a specific potential which should be realised. Not all individuals have the potential to be top achievers; some have only average potential and others below-average potential. What is of the greatest importance, however, is that every individual should utilise his/her potential in order to achieve according to that potential. Ford (1993: 80) regards the drop-out rate, school failure and lack of motivation as the most important indicators of underachievement. Learners fail to perform in school at the levels expected by people who believe that education is important.

The present generation of learners seems to have more under-achievers than previous generations, due to a variety of reasons. In the township secondary schools underachievement has been found to be mainly due to the medium of instruction, overcrowding, truancy and a shortage of textbooks. Unfortunately, the Department of Education has addressed this problem, as will become evident later in this article, by wittingly or unwittingly lowering standards. This is not a permanent solution because even if standards are lowered, some learners will still underachieve. In fact, if standards are lowered, underachievement is condoned or even encouraged. A clear preference for English as the medium of instruction in black schools had already emerged among the majority of black people in the late eighties. A number of factors contributed to this choice, the two most important being that English is recognised as a universal language and is commonly used in the world of commerce. Afrikaans was rejected as a medium of instruction because of its past imposition as a second medium of instruction in black education in 1976 (Lemmer 1995: 83).

The erstwhile departments of education for black people in South Africa had many visible inequalities and inadequacies in terms of facilities and resources over many years, such as shortages of schools, textbooks and well-qualified educators. The situation was aggravated by the ever-increasing number of learners in schools (Masitsa 1995: 46). These inadequacies became the source of serious discontent among black people. In the course of time this broadened from issues relating to education to encompass all aspects of the apartheid policy of government. The situation resulted in serious incidents of unrest and

disruption of schools by learners who ended up being disobedient and uncontrollable. Truancy, neglect of school work and a total disregard for order and discipline increased in schools (Masitsa 1995: 46). The change in the political dispensation of the country has not adequately addressed the shortage of resources or facilities in the schools. Truancy and a high drop-out rate remain serious problems in these schools.

In an attempt to address the issue of underachievement, this article explores the effect of the medium of instruction, overcrowding, truancy and the shortage of textbooks on the underachievement of secondary school learners in townships.

## 1. Conceptualisation

### 1.1 Underachievement

Underachievement is defined as the discrepancy between ability and achievement, or between what a learner is capable of achieving and what s/he is in fact achieving (Peters & Van Boxtel 1999: 213). Thus an underachiever does less well than s/he is capable of academically. The problem of underachievement undoubtedly raises many questions in the realm of assessment and intervention or remedial work. Peters & Van Boxtel (1999: 213), Ford (1993: 79) and Shaughnessy (1999: 203) summarise the most important characteristics of underachievers as follows:

- They have an external locus of control, which means that they lack a sense of control over factors influencing their lives, and attribute success to forces outside themselves.
- They may fail to implement adequate problem-solving strategies.
- They suffer from emotional disturbances, such as a lack of task persistence and reflectiveness, and are often impulsive and anxious, leading to negative school attitudes.
- They display emotional problems which result in disruptive behaviour such as tardiness and truancy.
- They do not concentrate on or show interest in schoolwork.

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- They forget or do not bother to do assignments, do not take pride in their work, ignore teachers or argue with them and are simply not engaged in the school learning process.
- They blame their teachers, parents, Attention Deficit Disorder or boredom for their problems, and their parents often do so too.<sup>1</sup>

## 2. Problem statement and aim of research

Underachievement is a familiar word to all involved in education as it often features in educational debate. However, there is a dearth of research on this topic in South Africa. Research confirms that in nearly every school today there is a huge difference between what students are capable of learning and what they are learning (Sullivan 1988: 20). Every learner possesses a specific academic potential which must be realised. One may have the potential for average achievement and another for above-average achievement. The most important thing, however, is that every learner has potential which must be realised. Every learner must utilise his/her potential in order to achieve in accordance with it.

For more than a decade there has been serious concern about the high failure rate among township matriculants. There has also been concern about the lack of motivation among learners, and their high drop-out rate in township secondary schools. In an effort to address these problems, the Department of Education introduced various interventions over time. It ordered that over-age learners who had failed matric should not be readmitted to schools, but referred to adult education institutions, to reduce overcrowding in schools. It tried to ensure that effective teaching would start at the beginning of the academic year and introduced measures to ensure that educators and learners attend school regularly. It tried to ensure that sufficient textbooks and stationery were supplied to schools, and on time. Educators' working hours were extended. Matric candidates using a second language as their medium of instruction were awarded a compensation in the form of a 1.5% bonus on their aggregate mark. In addition,

<sup>1</sup> The terms "teacher" and "educator" are synonymous and will be used interchangeably, as will "pupil", "student" and "learner", as well as "matric" and "grade 12".

tion, since 2001, the grade twelve examination results have included an innovative 25% continuous evaluation, comprising non-standardised test marks. Grade twelve results improved significantly as a result. In Mpumalanga Province in 1998, scores of grade twelve failures were illegally awarded marks with the sole purpose of increasing the pass rate of the province and boosting its image (*The Citizen* 1999). A circumspet analysis of these interventions revealed that, in the main, they addressed four factors, namely the medium of instruction, overcrowding, truancy and shortages of textbooks. Over the years poor matric results in the township schools had been blamed particularly on these factors. It was assumed that they impede learners' performance and inhibit academic achievement. This article will accordingly refer to these factors as the critical causes of underachievement in township secondary schools and will investigate their influence on academic performance. The writer acknowledges that other factors may contribute to underachievement, including socio-economic factors; lack of parental encouragement and support; teacher absenteeism, inexperience and low morale; change overload; lack of learner and teacher commitment and attitude, etc. The aim of this article, however, is to establish the effect of the four critical causes of underachievement on the performance of learners in township secondary schools.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 Selection of the target group

The study was conducted in a school district of the Free State Department of Education and targeted only grade twelve learners. Grade twelve learners were selected because they write a standardised examination. There were 72 secondary schools with grade twelve classes in this district. The writer selected as the target group only schools whose grade twelve pass rate in 2002 was below 50%, in order to investigate the effects of the critical causes of underachievement on their performance. There were twelve such schools in this district, all of them situated in the townships and using English as their medium of instruction. The writer discovered that township schools in this district do not differ significantly with regard to educators' qualifi-

cations or teacher-learner ratios. They are distinct only in respect of their number of learners and educators' experience.

A questionnaire was distributed to the twelve selected schools, but only eight of them, with a total of 911 learners, responded. The majority of grade twelve learners take six subjects, a very few seven. The pass rate of the eight schools, denoted A to H, was as follows: A 47.8%; B 32%; C 29.7 %; D 42.2%; E 49.4%; F 45.4%; G 46.1, and H 47.8%.

### 3.2 Research method

The investigation is based on a literature study and the above-mentioned questionnaire. Of significance in this regard is evidence on the effects of a second language as the medium of instruction, of overcrowding in schools, of shortages of textbooks and of truancy on academic performance. The questionnaire was used to gather information from the principals of the target schools regarding the grade twelves' English results, the pass rate in seven key subjects, class sizes, attendance, the allocation of textbooks, and each school's overall pass rate. Class sizes, attendance and the allocation of textbooks were correlated with learners' performance in the seven key subjects. The aim of the questionnaire was to obtain quantifiable, comparable data. It was completed anonymously to ensure confidentiality and truth in responses. The information provided by the questionnaire was analysed in terms of the following:

- the performance of the learners in English, the medium of instruction, to determine their knowledge of their medium of instruction;
- the sizes of classes at the target schools and their examination results, thus establishing whether the classes were small or overcrowded and comparing the performance of learners in both types of class;
- the average attendance of learners during the year and their examination results, thus establishing whether truancy was rife or not, and comparing the performances of learners who played truant and those who did not;
- the provision of textbooks at the target schools and the corresponding examination results, in order to establish whether learn-

ers had sufficient textbooks or not, and to compare the performance of the two groups.

### 3.3 Reliability and validity

The questionnaire was structured in such a way that the questions asked what they were intended to ask. Participants were merely asked to provide existing data. The questions related closely to the aim of the study. The findings were consistent and did not contradict one another. However, the self-report approach incorporated in questionnaires does present certain problems which may limit their validity, namely that respondents must co-operate in completing a questionnaire and they must relate what is, rather than what they think ought to be or what they think the researcher would like to read. In an endeavour to address this problem the author discussed with the respondents the importance of providing accurate information in the questionnaire. In addition, questionnaires were completed anonymously to ensure a true reflection of the respondents' views and to meet the ethical criterion of confidentiality. In this way content validity and reliability can be assured.

### 3.4 Data analysis

A descriptive analysis of the completed questionnaire will now be performed. All data gleaned by means of the questionnaire will be divided into four categories, namely data on the learners' performance in English, on class sizes, on attendance and on the provision of textbooks. After this each category will be analysed.

The paragraphs which follow present an in-depth but succinct discussion of the critical factors causing underachievement in township secondary schools, namely medium of instruction, overcrowded classes, truancy and a shortage of textbooks. The discussion of these factors is followed by profiles of the performance of learners at the target schools in English in the grade twelve examination, the class sizes of the target schools and learners' performance in the examination, attendance at the target schools and learners' performance in the examination, and the provision of textbooks at the target schools and learners' performance in the examination. The overriding aim is to

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establish the effect of these four factors on school performance. After a discussion of each critical factor data pertaining to it will be analysed.

## 4. Critical causes of underachievement

### 4.1 Medium of instruction

A medium of instruction forms the basis of all learning since everything a student learns is dependent on his/her command and control of language. As indicated earlier, the use of English as the preferred medium of instruction in township schools stems from the recognition that South Africa is multilingual and English is the language of learning in most countries of the world as well as a major language of commerce (Lemmer 1995: 83). Balfour (1999: 107) adds that the main reason for using English as the medium of instruction is that indigenous languages do not have the linguistic complexity to enable them to be used in technical and scientific contexts.

Education is impossible without communication between the educator and the educand. The feasibility of communication is reduced if one or both parties have a poor command of language (Masitsa 1988: 16). Therefore, language proficiency is undoubtedly a prerequisite for successful learning. Reading speed and, in particular, reading with insight are factors that must be taken into consideration in relation to scholastic achievement (Department of Education and Training 1989: 16). In the teaching situation command of language is of primary importance not only for the construction of the system of knowledge, but also for the development of thought. It is a crucial means of gaining knowledge and skills as well as a key to cognitive development and it can promote or impede scholastic success (Lemmer 1995: 83). One can therefore conclude that before a language is used as a medium of instruction, learners must feel at home with it, otherwise they will find it difficult to understand lessons, extract information from literature, and ask or answer questions in class, which would inhibit learning. It can thus be expected that learners with a lack of language ability will in all probability also be underachievers.

Balfour (1999: 106) holds the view that the medium of instruction in township schools is a problem underrecognised by the education



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sector in South Africa. There is little investigation of why students enter tertiary education with poor English language skills or why they possess no real linguistic competence. As Van Heerden (1996: 4) states, black learners experience problems because they cannot study in their first language. Most of them are not fluent in English, the tuition medium of their choice. They lack sufficient command of English to succeed at school. This leads to problems regarding effective comprehension of the content of academic material, analysis of questions and presentation of answers. In the examination or test a learner may know the answer but not have adequate vocabulary to express it, or lack a positive attitude (Lemmer 1995: 94). If learners struggle to understand their medium of instruction they will find it difficult to understand the subject matter. Complex concepts are particularly difficult for them to understand (Legotlo *et al* 2002: 116). Such learners do not have the basic language ability, vocabulary or insight to understand and grasp subject content (Department of Education and Training 1989: 16). Owing to poor comprehension, anything they learn tends to be easily and quickly forgotten. Since comprehension leads to retention and the two are fundamental to learning, they are deprived of both fundamentals of learning. One can only speak of success in learning if the learner is able to recall what s/he has learned. The factors discussed above put learners at risk of underachievement. According to Smith (1999), Free State educators contended that black learners' lack of proficiency in English was the single most important reason for the high grade twelve failure rate in 1999.

What has been made clear in this exposition is that learners must understand both the language (medium) and the subject matter, otherwise learning will degenerate into a senseless process of memorisation which will inevitably lead to underachievement. A second language, incompetently or only partially taught, impairs the learning process (Balfour 1999: 107). There is therefore a link between the use of English as the medium of instruction in township schools and their matriculation results. The exodus of black students from township schools to town schools immediately after the latter were thrown open to all students was mainly due to the fact that they wanted to be taught by educators who have mastered the English language and

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to attend functional, effective schools. Block (2002: 67) puts it aptly when he states that few township children in South Africa hear or use English regularly, or experience written language as part of the daily activities of their families.

Van Heerden's (1996: 4) argument is that language skill does not only entail knowledge of the vocabulary and syntax. It also implies that a person should be familiar with the socio-cultural frame of reference linked to the particular language, which is reflected in the study material presented through the medium of this language. According to Lemmer (1995: 94), English instruction at township schools is not based on speech and comprehension, which form the cornerstones of learning a language. Teachers themselves often lack the English proficiency necessary for effective teaching. There is no doubt that educators who are not proficient in the medium of instruction will be inhibited in their teaching. Teacher training does not equip teachers with the principles of language acquisition and thus teachers seldom have the knowledge and skill to support English language learning or to teach literacy skills across the curriculum. There is a lack of suitable textbooks and materials for the specialised language needs of second-language learners (Chick 1992: 284). As a result teachers resort to rote learning and drill and the use of more than one language medium to teach in many classes (Lemmer 1995: 88). The result is that learners in such schools are always at risk of underachievement. Among other things, Pluddemann (2002: 48) attributes the failure of English second language teaching to the poor English proficiency of the majority of teachers, for whom English is a second language which they themselves were poorly taught. He goes on to state that in 1999, when the Minister of Education introduced the awarding of extra marks as compensation to matric candidates writing their examinations in a second language, he was directly acknowledging the failure of English as a second language and a medium of instruction for black candidates in the townships. The profile which follows illustrates the English performance of grade twelve learners at the target schools.

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Table 1: Profile of the learners' performance in English

		Symbols obtained in English							
School	Learners	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H
A	120		2	5	14	32	65	2	
B	110			2	8	14	78	8	
C	63			1	10	21	27	4	
D	111		1	2	10	38	60		
E	135		1	3	31	44	56		
F	123			4	19	38	60	2	
G	137			7	21	41	61	7	
H	112			3	11	33	60	5	
Total	911		4	27	124	261	467	28	

Key to performance symbols: A 80-100%; B 70-79%; C 60-69%; D 50-59%; E 40-49%; F 30-39%; G 20-29%, and H 0-19%.

Of the total of 911, 3.4% obtained marks ranging between 60% and 79%, 13.6% between 50 and 59%, 28.7% between 49% and 40% and 54.3% marks of 39% and lower.

### 4.2 Overcrowded classes

A normal school classroom is designed to take 35 learners, which means that any classroom accommodating more than 40 learners is overcrowded. During the sixties and early seventies, the policy of the previous government of South Africa was that more secondary schools for black people should be built in the homelands than in urban areas. A backlog in the number of secondary schools in urban areas was created. The number of secondary school pupils increased dramatically from the late seventies. As a result of this, there was a shift in government policy and more secondary schools were built in urban areas although this could not keep pace with the ever-growing number of learners, and the backlog increased, leading to overcrowded schools and classrooms and a high learner/educator ratio. Hartshorne (1991: 42) states that the immediate effects of the growth in learners

were a serious shortage of classrooms, the near-absence of laboratories and libraries, overcrowded classes, a high teacher/pupil ratio and a high drop-out rate, which is a serious indicator of underachievement.

Although escalation in pupil numbers is a natural phenomenon, it was in this case aggravated by the abolition of influx control laws. Many black people left farms and moved to urban areas. At the beginning of 1990 there was a shortage of 3 912 secondary classrooms (roughly 130 schools) in the townships (Masitsa 1995: 63). In order to address this problem by 2000, the government was supposed to build approximately 600 classrooms or 53 secondary schools every year (Masitsa 1995: 63). The strain caused by the enrolment explosion in terms of the provision of classrooms, laboratories, libraries and other facilities, the supply of adequately qualified educators, and the maintenance of standards proved too much for a government that did not have the political will to provide the resources that were necessary if quality was not to suffer (Hartshorne 1991: 42). Owing to overcrowding, conditions in many black schools are poor, particularly in rural areas. There is a shortage of desks; classes are very large, and there is not much opportunity for individual attention from overworked educators (Le Roux 1993: 36). The situation in these schools leaves learners constantly at risk of underachievement

These inadequacies have not yet been adequately addressed, even by the present government. A recent study in the North-west Province found that overcrowding was a serious problem; some schools were poorly maintained, and that there was a shortage of educators, especially appropriately qualified educators. Classes had more than 60 learners due to a shortage of such educators (Legotlo *et al* 2002: 115). The Mpumalanga Department of Education was to spend R83 million in the 2003 financial year to alleviate overcrowding in schools. The money was to be used to build new schools as well as additional classes for overcrowded schools (*The Citizen* 2003a: 6).

Vink (1992: 200) claims that there is a causal relationship between the number of learners per educator and the quality of education received. Inadequate classrooms lead to congestion and discomfort, thus hampering academic activity. Overcrowded classes increase the workload of the teacher; make class management difficult; inhibit interaction between the teacher and the learner, and militate against gi-

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ving learners individual attention. As a result, teachers are unable to learn the strengths and weaknesses of learners or to assist them accordingly, while learners do not pay attention and are difficult to control (Masitsa 1995: 181-3). All these inhibiting factors found in overcrowded classes make it difficult for teachers to teach effectively and for the learner to learn effectively. Under such conditions learners are unable to perform in accordance with their full potential, thus leading to underachievement.

Smith and Le Roux (Le Roux 1993: 36) hold the view that teachers' workloads in overcrowded classes become a deterrent to their effective functioning. Such workloads do not only pose a threat to effective teaching, but also to effective evaluation and prompt feedback. Revision of work done also becomes only remotely possible. Thus the class becomes a breeding ground for underachievement. Learners who do not receive enough attention are inclined to work at a slow pace because they will not be noticed by their teacher. They often try to hide from the teacher and as a result the teacher does not become timeously aware of their weaknesses. This situation leads to a slackening of the link between the teacher and the class. The overall result of this situation is that learners underachieve on a large scale. The following profiles illustrate the sizes of classes at the target schools and their examination results.

Table 2: Profile of the class size

School A

Subjects	Number of learners	Class size	% passes	% failures
Mathematics	33	33	39.4	60.6
Physical Science	33	33	81.4	18.6
Accounting	34	34	94.1	5.9
Economics	34	34	79.4	20.6
Biology	72	36	70.8	29.2
Geography	64	32	64	36
History	64	32	23.4	76.6

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All classes were small at this school. The performance of learners was above 60% in five subjects and below 40% in two.

School B

Subjects	Number of learners	Class size	% passes	% failures
Mathematics	54	27	44.4	55.6
Physical Science	34	34	52.9	47.1
Accounting	21	21	76.2	23.8
Economics	21	21	80.9	19.1
Biology	34	34	61.8	38.2
Geography	48	48	22.9	77.1
History	48	48	18.9	81.1

The performance of learners in small classes was above 50% in four subjects and below 50% in one. In overcrowded classes performance was below 30% in two subjects.

School C

Subjects	Number of learners	Class size	% passes	% failures
Mathematics	17	17	17.6	82.4
Physical Science	14	14	28.6	71.4
Accounting	29	29	13.8	86.2
Economics	13	13	7.7	92.3
Biology	13	13	46.2	53.8
Geography	7	7	28.6	71.4
History	14	14	7.1	92.9

All classes were small at this school. The performance of learners was below 50% in seven subjects.

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School D

Subjects	Number of learners	Class size	% passes	% failures
Mathematics	44	22	70.4	29.6
Physical Science	25	25	96	4
Accounting	49	25	79.6	20.4
Economics	41	21	58.5	41.5
Biology	51	26	49	51
Geography	25	25	28	72
History	25	25	24	76

All classes were small at this school. The performance of learners was above 50% in four subjects and below 50% in three.

School E

Subjects	Number of learners	Class size	% passes	% failures
Mathematics	21	21	76.2	23.8
Physical Science	23	23	87	13
Accounting	57	29	62.2	37.8
Economics	57	29	71.9	28.1
Biology	73	37	41.1	58.9
Geography	52	26	36.7	63.3
History	23	23	38.5	61.5

All classes were small at this school. The performance of learners was above 60% in four subjects and below 50% in three.

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School F

Subjects	Number of learners	Class size	% passes	% failures
Mathematics	27	27	44.4	55.6
Physical Science	19	19	42.1	57.9
Accounting	29	29	51.7	48.3
Economics	22	22	54.5	45.5
Biology	22	22	45.5	54.5
Geography	19	19	42.1	57.9
History	29	29	37.9	62.1

All classes were small at this school. The performance of learners was above 50% in two subjects and below 50% in five.

School G

Subjects	Number of learners	Class size	% passes	% failures
Mathematics	39	39	41	59
Physical Science	30	30	46.7	53.3
Accounting	36	36	55.6	44.4
Economics	36	36	62.2	37.8
Biology	34	34	41.2	58.8
Geography	46	46	43.5	56.5
History	38	38	44.7	55.3

The performance of learners in small classes was above 50% in two subjects and below 50% in four. In one overcrowded class performance was below 50%.



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### School H

Subjects	Number of learners	Class size	% passes	% failures
Mathematics	28	28	46.4	53.6
Physical Science	33	33	45.6	54.4
Accounting	23	23	42.2	57.8
Economics	23	23	56.5	43.5
Biology	44	44	42.7	57.3
Geography	46	46	47.8	52.2
History	46	46	43.5	56.5

The performance of learners in small classes was above 50% in one subject and below 50% in three. In overcrowded classes performance was below 50% in three subjects.

### 4.3 Truancy

Student attendance is an important component contributing to school success. Hyland (1998: 2) states that student interaction with educators and other students in class helps to enhance the academic learning experience and provides a basis on which students can demonstrate mastery of the subject matter. Thus the educational process requires continuity of instruction and classroom participation. All children deserve a solid education to prepare them for the challenges of today's world. Consequently, a learner who is not at school during school hours is at risk because repeated unexcused absences have serious consequences for education (Klobuchar 2000: 2). Students who are frequently absent from school cannot complete their syllabuses and as a result will not know and master all the work. Jordan (2001: 118) holds the view that fragmented attendance leads to early discontinuance and more often than not to underachievement.

Masitsa (1995: 94) found that absenteeism or truancy, which is the legacy of the period of the "struggle against apartheid" is rife in township schools. Secondary school learners, in particular, became insubordinate and disobedient to school authority. They would arrive late at school and leave before the end of the school day or simply stay away from school for a couple of days or weeks. Learners also took

part in consumer boycotts and stay-aways and would not attend school during these. In many cases boycotts and stay-aways were organised, enforced on the community and monitored by learners themselves. Because syllabuses could not be completed, standards deteriorated rapidly and learners were automatically promoted to the next class. There was wholesale neglect of school work, a high rate absenteeism or truancy, a negative attitude to school work, lack of self-motivation and low morale — all ultimately producing poor matric results (Masitsa 1995: 95; Nxumalo 1993: 55). Other factors could contribute to truancy in schools today, such as the fact that since many parents are unemployed, some children have no food and prefer to stay at home rather than go to school hungry. However, whatever its causes, truancy has dire consequences. It hampers teachers' endeavours to complete their work programme because they are all too often forced to repeat work already done, and do not have a clear picture of how their classes are performing. Learners who do not complete their work programme are at risk of underachievement. On the other hand, lack of discipline and morale are severe barriers to effective teaching and learning and thus also causes of underachievement.

It seems that the problem of truancy in township schools has no simple solution. Makwela (2003: 15-7) claims that after the Premier and the MEC of the Free State Province visited schools at the beginning of 2003, they voiced serious concern about the cleanliness of the schools and the poor attendance of learners and educators. He goes on to say that in 2002 the Free State Education Department appointed mentors from the best schools in the province for a period of 9 months to support the principals of underachieving township secondary schools. Two of the serious problems the mentors encountered in these schools were poor learner performance and truant learners and educators. Research by Logotlo *et al* (2002: 115) on the causes of poor matric results in black schools found that truancy was one of the major causes. Hyland (1998: 2) argues that poverty and fear of a lack of job opportunities can undermine young people's motivation. He goes on to say that some learners argue that going to school is not important because learning does not guarantee employment. For this reason they are not motivated to attend school regularly, but only to pass the time. Lack of motivation to learn is not only a cause of

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truancy but also of underachievement. The profile which follows illustrates the attendance of learners at the target schools and their examination results.

Table 3: Profile of school attendance

School	Learners	Number of school days in a year	Absentees in a year	Average absentees per day	% passes	% failure
A	120	195	986	5.1	48	52
B	110	195	997	5.1	32	68
C	63	195	81	0.4	29.7	70.3
D	111	195	1120	5.7	42.2	57.8
E	135	195	854	4.4	49.4	50.6
F	123	195	787	4	45.4	54.6
G	137	195	886	4.5	47.1	52.9
H	112	195	839	4.3	47.3	52.7

Three schools had an absentee rate of 5 learners per day, four schools had an absentee rate of 4 learners per day and the lowest absentee rate was 0.4 per day.

#### 4.4 Shortage of textbooks

Textbooks can make a great contribution to the quality of education. They are valuable sources from which learners can derive information or tutorial materials, enabling them to achieve at school. Without textbooks learners will be incapacitated because they will be without a source of information about lessons given in class. Textbooks assist learners to make maximum use of teaching and learning time and thus are central to the teaching of the subject matter (Themane & Mabasa 2002: 279). If learners have to share textbooks, they do not learn as often and as thoroughly as they ought. Thus, an inadequate supply of textbooks can lead to underachievement and ultimately to poor performance. The Department of Education provides each learner with textbooks free of charge. The books are made available to learners on loan and are meant to be used for a number of years by successive groups of learners, so learners have to return used books annually and replace any lost ones (Louw 1990: 16).

The adequate supply and safe-keeping of textbooks constituted one of the burning issues for many years in the former Department of Education for black people (Masitsa 1995: 60). Often the supply fell short of the demand, when there was a sudden unexpected growth in the number of learners at schools or when the department had not supplied enough material. The safe-keeping of textbooks was a far more problematic issue. Scores of pupils in schools lost their books and did not replace them and some would deliberately not return them at the end of the year. In other instances learners were supplied with books at the beginning of the year only to drop out of school during the course of the year, without returning the school books in their custody (Masitsa 1995: 61). The situation was aggravated by rapid growth in the number of pupils in schools (Le Roux 1993: 36). In such a situation proper learning is seriously compromised and underachievement encouraged because scores of learners either have to share textbooks or do without. Such learners depend on the sketchy summary of work provided by the teacher during lessons. Louw (1990: 16) states that the loss of books in township secondary schools since 1988 resulted in a great shortage in 1990, requiring replenishment at a cost of R8 million.

The resolution of the problem of a shortage of textbooks in township secondary schools seems to be a remote possibility. Some schools in the Limpopo Province face a shortage crisis that has seen up to three pupils sharing one textbook, because orders for the year were not placed in time and pupils did not return all the books at the end of the previous year (*The Citizen* 2003b). Themane & Mabasa (2002: 278) investigated learner support material in the Northern Province and found that there was a serious shortage of textbooks in spite of an ever-increasing budget for the purchase of textbooks by the Department of Education. All too often books are delivered late due to late requisition, lack of transport or lack of capacity on the part of the suppliers who won the tenders to do the job. Themane & Mabasa (2002: 278) also found that many schools do not keep records of their textbooks and do not know how many books they have. Schools do not have safe storage places for textbooks and teachers depend on the goodwill of the learners to return them at the end of each year. Unfortunately, some learners either steal books from where they are

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stored or do not return them at the end of the year. Research by Legotlo *et al* (2002: 115) in the Northern Province revealed that many learners did not have all the required textbooks. In the worse case, a class of forty learners was required to share five copies of a textbook, and were dependent on copying notes provided by the educator. The result of this was low morale and a lack of commitment, which are causes of underachievement. Although the Free State Province experiences serious shortages of textbooks, the policy of its Education Department prohibits schools from withholding learners' results as a way of forcing them to return or pay for lost textbooks (Makwela 2003: 9). The following profiles illustrate the provision of textbooks at the target schools and the learners' examination results.

Table 4: Profile of the provision of textbooks

School A

Subjects	Number of learners	Number of textbooks	% passes	% failures
Mathematics	33	33	39.4	60.6
Physical Science	33	33	81.5	18.5
Accounting	34	34	94.1	5.9
Economics	34	34	79.4	20.6
Biology	72	36	70.8	29.2
Geography	64	32	64	36
History	64	32	23.4	76.6

All learners had textbooks at this school. The performance of learners was above 60% in five subjects and below 40% in two.

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School B

Subjects	Number of learners	Number of textbooks	% passes	% failures
Mathematics	54	54	44.4	55.6
Physical Science	34	34	52.9	47.1
Accounting	21	21	76.2	23.8
Economics	21	21	80.9	19.1
Biology	34	34	61.8	38.2
Geography	48	48	22.9	77.1
History	48	48	18.9	81.1

All learners had textbooks at this school. The performance of learners was above 50% in four subjects and below 50% in three.

School C

Subjects	Number of learners	Number of textbooks	% passes	% failures
Mathematics	17	17	17.6	82.4
Physical Science	14	14	28.6	71.4
Accounting	29	29	13.8	86.2
Economics	13	13	7.7	92.3
Biology	13	13	46.2	53.8
Geography	7	7	28.6	71.4
History	14	14	7.1	92.9

All learners had textbooks at this school. The performance of learners was below 50% in seven subjects.

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#### School D

Subjects	Number of learners	Number of textbooks	% passes	% failures
Mathematics	44	44	70.4	29.6
Physical Science	25	25	96	4
Accounting	49	49	79.6	20.4
Economics	41	41	58.5	41.5
Biology	51	51	49	51
Geography	25	25	28	72
History	25	25	24	76

All learners had textbooks at this school. The performance of learners was above 50% in four subjects and below 50% in three.

#### School E

Subjects	Number of learners	Number of textbooks	% passes	% failures
Mathematics	21	21	76.2	23.8
Physical Science	23	23	87	13
Accounting	57	57	63.2	36.8
Economics	57	57	71.9	28.1
Biology	73	73	41.1	58.9
Geography	52	52	36.7	63.3
History	13	13	38.5	61.5

All learners had textbooks at this school. The performance of learners was above 60% in four subjects and below 50% in three.

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School F

Subjects	Number of learners	Number of textbooks	% passes	% failures
Mathematics	27	27	44.4	55.6
Physical Science	19	19	42.1	57.9
Accounting	29	29	51.7	48.3
Economics	22	22	54.5	45.5
Biology	22	22	45.5	54.5
Geography	19	19	42.1	57.9
History	29	29	37.9	62.1

All learners had textbooks at this school. The performance of learners was above 50% in two subjects and below 50% in five.

School G

Subjects	Number of learners	Number of textbooks	% passes	% failures
Mathematics	39	39	41	59
Physical Science	30	30	46.7	53.3
Accounting	36	36	52	48
Economics	36	36	55.5	44.5
Biology	68	34	41.2	58.8
Geography	46	46	43.5	56.5
History	38	38	44.7	55.3

The performance of learners was above 50% in two subjects and below 50% in four where there were no shortages of textbooks. It was below 50% in one subject where there was a shortage of textbooks.



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### School H

Subjects	Number of learners	Number of textbooks	% passes	% failures
Mathematics	56	56	46.4	53.6
Physical Science	33	33	45.5	54.5
Accounting	23	23	42.2	57.8
Economics	23	23	52.5	47.5
Biology	89	89	42.7	57.3
Geography	44	44	47.8	52.2
History	44	44	43.5	56.5

All learners had textbooks at this school. The performance of learners was above 50% in one subject and below 50% in six.

## 5. Discussion

The pass rate at all schools was below 50%. Out of a total of 911 learners who wrote an English examination, 3.4% obtained marks ranging between 69 and 79%, 13.6% between 50 and 59%, 28.7 % between 40 and 49%, and 54.3 % marks of 39% and lower. If English was used as the medium of instruction, these categories of marks should be interpreted as good, average, poor and very poor, respectively. Therefore, 83% of learners in the participating schools lacked the command of English necessary for school success. They found it very difficult to use English as a medium of instruction and this would have had a detrimental effect on their academic performance. The empirical research findings in this case overwhelmingly confirm the findings of the literature study by proving that township secondary schools learners do not have a good command of English, which is their medium of instruction, and that this certainly contributes to their poor scholastic performance.

Out of 56 classes in participating schools, 50 were small and six overcrowded, thus it is not possible to compare the performance of learners in small and overcrowded classes. This also implies that overcrowded classes were a minor problem at these schools. In the participating schools the results of 22 small classes were over 50%

and the results of 28 small classes below 50%, whereas the results of four overcrowded classes were over 50% and those of two overcrowded classes below 50%. Thus, the results of 22 small classes and two overcrowded classes confirm the literature's findings that learners in small classes perform well in the examination, whereas the results of 28 small classes and four overcrowded classes do not. Poor performance in small classes could be due to some of the other critical causes of underachievement discussed here or to other variables not under investigation in this study. Good performance in overcrowded classes could also be due to variables not investigated in this study.

Regarding school attendance at the participating schools, three schools had an average absentee rate of five learners each day, four schools an absentee rate of four learners each day and one school an absentee rate of 0.4 per day. A daily average absentee rate of four learners in a class is high. These empirical research results prove conclusively that truancy is rife in township secondary schools. Since these schools performed poorly, the results confirm the literature's finding that truancy leads to poor scholastic performance. Poor performance in a school with a very low absentee rate may be due to other critical causes of underachievement or to variables not investigated in this study.

Concerning the provision of textbooks, all learners in all the participating schools except for one class had textbooks. It is therefore not possible to compare the performance of learners who had textbooks with that of learners who did not. The results of 22 classes were above 50% and those of 33 classes below 50%, with the results of the one class in which not all learners had textbooks being below 50%. Therefore, the results of 23 classes confirm the literature's finding that learners who have textbooks perform well in the examination, whereas the results of 33 classes do not. Poor performance in the 33 classes may have been caused by other critical causes of underachievement or by variables not investigated in this study.

Of the variables not investigated in this study which could have had an effect on learners' performance, socio-economic factors, a lack of parental encouragement and support, teacher absenteeism and low morale, inexperience of teachers, a lack of learner and teacher commitment, poor motivation, and a negative attitude are the most

important. All in all, the findings of this study support the assertion made at the beginning of the study that the medium of instruction, overcrowded classes, truancy and shortages of textbooks are the critical causes of underachievement in township secondary schools. To a great extent the findings of the empirical study corroborate those of the literature study. The research aim has been achieved and the research problem resolved. The research has, however, revealed the need to probe further the effects of overcrowded classes and shortages of textbooks on scholastic performance and to investigate the causes of truancy in township secondary schools. The research has yielded recommendations for alterations in educational practice and solutions to practically orientated educational problems. The research findings of this article will, it is hoped, add considerable knowledge to a topic often debated in academic discourse, but seldom researched in South Africa.

## 6. Findings

The findings from the literature study indicate, without any doubt, that the medium of instruction, overcrowding, truancy and shortages of textbooks are critical causes of underachievement in township secondary schools.

Awarding compensatory marks to learners studying a subject in the medium of a second language leads to a lowering of standards because learners are awarded marks they do not deserve. In this way underachievement is condoned.

The shortage of school buildings and educators, especially appropriately qualified educators, is one of the primary causes of overcrowding in schools.

An inadequate supply of textbooks by the Department of Education and poor control of books in schools and by undisciplined learners are the major contributory factors to the shortage of textbooks experienced in schools.

Truancy is characteristic of many township secondary schools.

The English performance of the 911 grade twelve learners of the target schools is categorised as follows: 3.4% obtained marks ranging

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between 60 and 79%, 13.6% between 50 and 59%, 28.7% between 49 and 40%, and 54.3% marks of 39% and lower.

The performance of learners was above 50% in 22 small classes, and below 50% in 28 small classes. Their performance was above 50% in four overcrowded classes, and below 50% in two overcrowded classes. Overcrowded classes were not a major problem at the participating schools.

Three schools had an average absentee rate of five learners per day, four schools an absentee rate of four learners per day and one school a low absentee rate of 0.4 per day.

All learners at all participating schools had textbooks, with the exception of one subject at one school. A shortage of textbooks was thus not a problem at these schools. The performance of learners in subjects where there were no shortages of textbooks was above 50% in 22 classes and below 50% in 33 classes. Their performance in the one subject and class, where there was a shortage of textbooks was below 50%.

Although other variables may contribute to underachievement, this article has confirmed the assertion that the medium of instruction, overcrowding, truancy and shortages of textbooks are critical causes of underachievement in township secondary schools.

## 7. Recommendations

The Department of Education could overcome the problem of overcrowding by building enough schools to address the backlog at once, and thereafter building enough schools to cope with increasing numbers of learners. In addition it should employ adequate and appropriately qualified educators.

It should also ensure that there are enough textbooks at schools and that they are supplied on time. Schools should ensure that textbooks are stored in a safe place and well cared for and that lost books are promptly replaced.

Parents should work together with educators, set reasonable goals for their children and motivate them to attend school regularly. The causes of truancy need to be thoroughly investigated and solutions found to address them.

Educators should receive intensive training in identifying under-achievers and assisting them to achieve.

Parents and educators should assist learners to identify with good role models who performed well at school and who have achieved something worthwhile in life. In this regard one should remember Plato's words: "What is honoured in one's country is what will be cultivated" (Shaughnessy 1999: 203).

Teacher-training institutions should devise specialised methods of teaching English that will enable them to equip educators with the English proficiency necessary for effective teaching. Only educators proficient in English should teach it at school. The ideal would be for English to be taught by mother-tongue educators.

## 8. Conclusion

The body of research knowledge amassed and discussed in this article compels the writer to infer that underachievement is not merely a personal problem, but a social one. It is not only the problem of the learner who underachieves, but also of the community in which that learner will later work and interact with others. It does not end the moment the learner leaves school, but continues possibly throughout life. Underachievement is counterproductive because it results in loss of confidence and further lowers the self-esteem of the underachiever (Ciaccio 1998: 11). If this problem is to be solved, the potential underachiever must be identified before s/he has a chance to fail. It is therefore imperative that educators should be fully equipped to address the problem of underachievement so as to eliminate it or at least reduce its effect on performance.

Learners should be motivated to strive for success in their school-work, because success raises self-esteem, which is crucial to the learning process. Success breeds success. Regular attendance should not only be encouraged, but enforced, because it is vital for learners to do their best at school and it is an important habit to develop. Truant learners are also more likely to be involved in crime because idleness among the youth leads to deviant behaviour. The problems of under-resourced schools should not be tolerated because such schools incapacitate educators in their provision of education and learners in their

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performance. Only educators who have a thorough knowledge of English and who have received intensive training in teaching a second language can help alleviate the problems encountered with English in township secondary schools. There is no doubt that the resolution of the problems of underachievement in schools will need to address not only scholastic problems, but life problems as well, because under-achievers can also underachieve in life and thus retard the production and development which are crucial for human survival. Achievement, on the other hand, can lead to improved production, economic development and a better life for all citizens.

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