






The psychoanalytic exploration of the dangerous obsession with the matric results in South African High schools

Ramasela Phuti Mokgotho,¹  Mohammed Xolile Ntshangase¹  & Nkarhi Excellent Mathebula¹ 

¹ University of Limpopo, Sovenga, Limpopo, South Africa.

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to argue that the obsession of teachers with obtaining good matric results is dangerous. The danger of this obsession is twofold, (i) as teachers ignore other school grades while focussing only on grade 12, they perpetrate a vicious cycle whereby they will always have to overwork at grade 12 for good matric results, and (ii) too much focus on grade 12 with all the extra activities and extra lessons risks creating a burnout and information cramming than learning to understand. This study purposively sampled 4 teachers, 6 learners, and 3 parents for semi-structured interviews, which will aid in this explorative study. The data collected through interviews was thematically analysed. Critical social theory is adopted as the lens to navigate through this exploration. Findings showed that although teachers believe that their system works, learners are not happy with the overworking that befalls them in grade 12. Recommendations include that preparation for a higher pass-rate in matric must not be a last-minute quick-fix in grade 12, but rather be a continuous process that is integrated in all grades. This study contributes to existing literature by giving a unique critique of overworking grade 12 learners while ignoring all other grades due to an obsession with good matric results.

Keywords: Pass-Rate, Matric, Overworking, Exhaustion, Stress, Burnout

INTRODUCTION

The South African education system is frequently scrutinized for its focus on the matric (NSC) examination results, with many schools being under immense pressure to achieve high pass rates.¹ In this education system, matric results are more than just academic indicators; they are associated with social, economic, and institutional significance. The matric results serve as an entryway to tertiary education, employment opportunities, and societal status.² As a result, the focus on matric results has intensified to the extent that it drives the entire pedagogical approach of many high schools. However,

¹ Memory Dizha and M. O. Olawole, "Spatio-Temporal Analysis of Schools Performance at the National Senior Certificate (Matric) Examination in Western Cape Province, South Africa," in *International Conference of the African Association of Remote Sensing and the Environment* (Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland, 2024), 119–49, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-64213-5_7.

² Andiphe Ndlebe, "The Relationship between Attaining Matric and Labour Market Outcomes in South Africa," 2022.

CORRESPONDENCE – Nkarhi Excellent Mathebula Email: nkarhi.mathebula@ul.ac.za

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this intense national focus has gradually evolved into an obsession, especially among teachers and school administrators who feel pressured to produce a high pass rate under the scrutiny of the Department of Basic Education, the media, and the general public.

While this fixation is often justified as a compulsory response to underperformance in schools, this study contends that the obsession with matric results has become dangerous and counterproductive. This singular fixation not only distorts pedagogical priorities but also produces harmful effects both psychologically and structurally. The psychoanalytic lens adopted in this study allows researchers to explore the unconscious dynamics, projections, and anxieties that inform teachers' behaviours, institutional priorities, and learners' experiences. In so doing, the study aims to illuminate how over-investment in Grade 12 outcomes obscures long-term learning objectives, perpetuates systemic inefficiencies, inflicts psychological stress on learners, and perpetuates a cycle of educational inequality.

South Africa has been on a journey to redress the educational imbalances post-apartheid.³ Despite the noticeable progress in enrolment and access, the quality of education remains highly uneven.⁴ Most schools, predominantly those in previously marginalised communities, face the pressure to demonstrate academic progress through standardised assessments. In this case, Matric results have become a shorthand for school quality, teacher capabilities, and learners' performance. Schools are constantly ranked based on their Matric pass rate, as high-performing schools are celebrated and awarded, while underperforming schools face scrutiny.⁵

The response from school leadership, administrators and teachers has been to double down on Grade 12, making sure to direct all substantial resources, energy, and instructional time towards this terminal year. Teachers often conduct extra classes during weekends, school holidays, design intensive revision programs, implement study camps, and minimise instructional activities in lower grades to allocate sufficient time to the Grade 12 learners.⁶ While these interventions are designed to boost performance, they usually come at the cost of learner well-being and holistic education. Moreover, this approach creates teaching imbalances whereby learning in earlier grades becomes neglected, leading to a cycle of unpreparedness that compounds the pressure on both learners and teachers at the matric level.⁷

This study is rooted in the realisation that this systemic obsession with Matric results represents not just a pedagogical or administrative concern, but a deeper psycho-social phenomenon. Teachers are not merely responding to academic targets; they are acting out internalised anxieties, institutional pressures, and symbolic imperatives that shape their professional identities and interpersonal relationships.⁸ Understanding these dynamics requires more than policy analysis; it demands a psychoanalytic exploration of the inner lives of educators, learners, and families as they navigate the demands of the educational system.

When it comes to educational outcomes, South Africa ranks the lowest among middle-income countries that participate in international assessments of academic achievement. In fact, its performance is even poorer than that of many lower-income African nations. The annual statistics from the Grade 12 National Senior Certificate (NSC) exams can be misleading, as they exclude learners who drop out before reaching Grade 12. Out of every 100 children who start school, only 50 reach Grade 12, 40 pass the exam, and just 12 meet the requirements for university admission. Young people aged 18 to 24 who do not pursue any form of post-secondary education face significant economic challenges. They struggle to secure full-time work and are among the most likely to experience prolonged or even permanent unemployment.⁹

³ Shadrack T Mzangwa, "The Effects of Higher Education Policy on Transformation in Post-Apartheid South Africa," *Cogent Education* 6, no. 1 (2019): 1592737.

⁴ L.I. Rais, "Education in South Africa: Post-Apartheid Dilemma" (University of Martyr Sheikh Larbi Tebessi Tebessa, 2024).

⁵ J. Schneider and E. L. Hutt, *Off the Mark: How Grades, Ratings, and Rankings Undermine Learning (but Don't Have to)* (Harvard University Press, 2023).

⁶ T. Radinger and L. Boeskens, "More Time at School: Lessons from Case Studies and Research on Extended School Days.," *OECD Education Working Papers*, 252 (2021): 1–153.

⁷ N. Spaull, "Education Quality in South Africa: An Overview," *South African Journal of Education* 33, no.3 (2013): 1–25.

⁸ Elicia Lewis, "Pressure, Threat, and Fear in the Classroom: Pupils' and Teachers' Perceptions of Soft Failure in an 11+ Context" (University of East London, 2023).

⁹ Spaull, "Education Quality in South Africa: An Overview."

Locally, Spaul and Kotze argue that foundational skills in literacy and numeracy are often not adequately developed in earlier grades, meaning that by the time learners reach Grade 12, teachers must resort to crisis teaching, cramming, coaching, and rote repetition to get learners through the exams.¹⁰ The system thus becomes reactive rather than developmental. As Moodley points out, such an approach may boost short-term results but does not contribute to long-term intellectual growth or emotional resilience.¹¹ The consequences for learners are profound, as one may cite burnout, anxiety, low self-esteem, and academic disengagement are increasingly reported among high school learners.¹² A study by Baloyi found that a significant proportion of Matric learners in Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal experienced chronic stress symptoms during exam preparation periods.¹³ The pressure to succeed becomes internalized, with learners equating failure not just with academic shortfall but with moral or personal inadequacy.

LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Link and Anthes, the intense fixation on grades not only restricts the focus on academic success but also severely impacts learners' psychological health and identity formation.¹⁴ This grade obsession transforms education into a stressful competition, overshadowing the joy and purpose of learning.

One of the most deeply entrenched and damaging dynamics within the South African education system is the disproportionate focus placed on Grade 12 at the expense of the preceding school years. This narrow prioritisation of the National Senior Certificate (NSC) examination has far-reaching consequences not only for learners who arrive at matric with serious academic deficits, but also for teachers, who are left to shoulder the burden of years of neglected learning. Each year, Grade 12 educators find themselves forced to overwork under intense pressure, acting as emergency responders in a system that has long failed its learners.¹⁵

What makes this pattern so unsustainable is the systemic neglect of foundational teaching in earlier grades. Numerous studies show that learners in South Africa fall behind very early in their academic careers and continue to fall further back with each progressing grade.¹⁶ Research highlights that learners entering Grade 10 are often expected to have a solid grasp of basic grammar, mathematics, and other foundational subjects; however, this assumption has proven inaccurate.¹⁷ Many learners lack the essential background knowledge needed to succeed in their current subjects. Data shows that out of the 1,627,004 learners who took the Grade 12 exams between 2009 and 2011, 54% did not pass.¹⁸ The overall quality of education in South Africa is generally poor, with one of the main contributing factors

¹⁰ Nicholas Spaul and Janeli Kotze, "Starting behind and Staying behind in South Africa," *International Journal of Educational Development* 41 (March 2015): 13–24, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2015.01.002>.

¹¹ Sogen Moodley, "Defining City-to-City Learning in Southern Africa: Exploring Practitioner Sensitivities in the Knowledge Transfer Process," *Habitat International* 85 (March 2019): 34–40, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.habitatint.2019.02.004>.

¹² Chang Zhang et al., "Associations Between Academic Stress and Depressive Symptoms Mediated by Anxiety Symptoms and Hopelessness Among Chinese College Students," *Psychology Research and Behavior Management* Volume 15 (March 2022): 547–56, <https://doi.org/10.2147/PRBM.S353778>.

¹³ Carine Nhlamulo Baloyi, "The Impact of Educators' Professionalism on Learners Academic Performance at Community Schools in Gauteng Province" (University of South Africa (South Africa), 2022).

¹⁴ L. J. Link, M. Leeson, and J. Anthes, "The Hidden Costs of Traditional Grading Systems," *ASCD Educational Leadership* 82, no. 8 (2025): 12–19.

¹⁵ Belinda Agyapong et al., "Stress, Burnout, Anxiety and Depression among Teachers: A Scoping Review," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 19, no. 17 (August 27, 2022): 10706, <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph191710706>.

¹⁶ Montfort Mlachila and Thhalefang Moeletsi, "Struggling to Make the Grade: A Review of the Causes and Consequences of the Weak Outcomes of South Africa's Education System," 2019.

¹⁷ Ismail Kader, "Challenges of Grade Progression and Promotion in Outcomes Based Education among Educators of Grade Ten Learners in the Western Cape. a Case Study of Emmerose Secondary School" (University of the Western Cape, 2012).

¹⁸ Siphon Masondo, "Why I Would Give Motshekga an F for Failure," news24, January 31, 2023, <https://www.news24.com/opinions/columnists/guestcolumn/siphon-masondo-why-i-would-give-motshekga-an-f-for-failure-20230131>; Mark De Vos, Kristin Van der Merwe, and Caroline Van der Mescht, "A Linguistic Research Programme for Reading in African Languages to Underpin CAPS," *Journal for Language Teaching* 48, no. 2 (2014): 148–77.

being the low standard of teaching and learning.¹⁹ A 2021 analysis of learning trajectories found that children in disadvantaged settings are already about 1.8 years behind expected learning benchmarks by Grade 3. By Grade 9, this gap has widened to 2.8 years. This steady accumulation of learning deficits is not addressed as learners move through Grades 4 to 11. Instead, they are often promoted automatically into higher grades without the foundational competencies required to succeed. By the time they arrive in Grade 12, they lack not only the academic content knowledge but also the learning skills necessary to engage with the matric curriculum meaningfully.²⁰

As a result, the responsibility for addressing these longstanding gaps falls squarely on Grade 12 teachers, who must attempt to compensate for years of poor teaching, insufficient support, and missed learning opportunities. This means that matric educators are not merely teaching Grade 12 content; they are simultaneously re-teaching key concepts from lower grades, often beginning with the basics. Whether it is reading comprehension, basic arithmetic, or subject-specific foundational knowledge, these gaps must be urgently filled if learners are to stand a chance of passing the NSC exams. This is not just an extra workload; it is a monumental and unrealistic demand. Teachers are expected to deliver a full curriculum, prepare learners for high-stakes exams, provide remediation, and offer emotional support all within a single academic year. Unsurprisingly, this leads to significant professional strain. Research by Otsin indicates that matric teachers frequently report high levels of occupational stress, emotional exhaustion, and a persistent sense of failure.²¹ Despite working long hours, sacrificing personal time, and investing emotionally in their learners' success, many teachers still face the painful reality of underwhelming results. This is not a reflection of teacher capability, but rather the inevitable outcome of systemic neglect earlier in the schooling process.

This cycle of crisis intervention in Grade 12 is both illogical and unsustainable. It creates a scenario where the education system treats symptoms rather than causes. Teachers are expected to rescue underprepared learners in the final year of school, but little is done to prevent those learners from falling behind in the first place. Foundational literacy and numeracy, which are critical to future learning, are not being secured.²² According to the 2016 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), more than 80% of South African Grade 4 learners cannot read for meaning in any language. Similarly, in the 2019 Trends in Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), South African Grade 9 learners scored the lowest out of all 39 participating countries on a test designed for Grade 8 learners.²³ These outcomes clearly show that by the time learners reach high school, they are already far behind their global peers, and those from rural and disadvantaged areas suffer even more. What makes the situation even more challenging is that high school teachers are unable to address the learning gaps of the learners immediately they get into grade 08, as their attention is already concentrated on supporting Grade 12 learners, who themselves already have significant learning deficits. This means that the grade 08s will progress to grade 09 with even deeper deficits. This cycle then becomes non-ending. The 2011 TIMSS study showed that Grade 9 learners in KwaZulu-Natal were, on average, 2.5 years behind their counterparts in the Western Cape in science. Similarly, the National School Effectiveness Study (2007–2009) found that Grade 3 pupils from former white schools scored higher on the same tests than Grade 5 pupils from former black schools, revealing stark inequalities in educational achievement by age eight.²⁴

¹⁹ De Vos, Van der Merwe, and Van der Mescht, "A Linguistic Research Programme for Reading in African Languages to Underpin CAPS."

²⁰ Thandi Priscillia Nkosi and Rufus Olufemi Adebayo, "An Exploration of the Progression Policy and Its Effects on Learner Achievement in KwaZulu-Natal," *Eurasian Journal of Business and Management* 9, no. 3 (2021): 194–207, <https://doi.org/10.15604/ejbm.2021.09.03.002>.

²¹ E. Otsin, "Assessing the Causes of Stress among Teachers and Its Management by Heads in Selected Junior High Schools in the Atwima Nwabiagya North District" (University of Education, 2021).

²² Rajesh Laxman, "Promoting Early Childhood Literacy and Numeracy: Effective Strategies for Foundational Learning," *Xpertno International Journal of Interdisciplinary Research* 1, no. 2 (2024): 13–22.

²³ Sarah J Howie et al., "PIRLS 2016: South African Highlights Report" (Centre for Evaluation and Assessment (CEA), 2017).

²⁴ Thembele Trusty Simelane, *Barriers to High Performance in Physical Science among Learners: A Case of Selected Township Secondary Schools in South Africa* (University of South Africa (South Africa), 2019); Paul Taylor, *Religion in the Digital Age: Faith and Media after the Internet* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

What emerges from these statistics is a troubling picture: the vast majority of learners are not equipped to be in Grade 12, yet the success of the entire system is measured by how well these learners perform in their final year. This obsession with matric results has led to distorted priorities. Ann Bernstein's critique of President Ramaphosa's 2023 State of the Nation address says education is illusory. The matric pass rate may look respectable on paper, but it conceals the fact that nearly half of all learners who begin high school never make it to Grade 12. Of those who do, many are over-age due to grade repetition; between 55% and 59% of learners in Grades 10 to 12 fall into this category.

The implications for Grade 12 teachers are clear: each year, they receive a cohort of learners who are ill-prepared, discouraged, and often disengaged. These teachers must then work overtime to get learners through the NSC examinations, setting extra lessons, designing remedial materials, and offering one-on-one tutoring, all of which extend their working hours and drain their emotional resources. And yet, because the underlying causes are never addressed, this effort must be repeated every year. The pressure never subsides; it only renews with each new group of inadequately prepared learners. This pattern can be understood not only as a systemic failure but also as a psychological defence mechanism. In psychoanalytic terms, the system may be engaging in a form of "reaction formation" a kind of institutional anxiety management. Rather than confronting the deeper dysfunctions in early-grade education, the system distracts itself with hyperactivity at a single crisis point: Grade 12. In this way, manic intervention in matric becomes a way of disavowing the reality of broader structural collapse.

One of the most immediate and visible consequences of the prevailing obsession with academic achievement in Grade 12 examinations is the profound psychological burden it places on learners. The final year of secondary education becomes a crucible of intense pressure, where success is framed not merely as academic accomplishment but as a marker of personal worth and identity. Within this high-stakes environment, failure is experienced not as a setback but as a personal deficiency, often internalized as shame or moral failure.²⁵ This emotional load is not created in isolation; it is cultivated by a broader schooling culture that equates academic results with future success, social mobility, and even personal virtue.²⁶

This culture is not produced in isolation. It reflects a broader societal and educational logic, deeply influenced by neoliberal values, that prizes quantifiable success, rankings, and short-term performance over developmental continuity, emotional well-being, and the cultivation of diverse talents.²⁷ Parents, teachers, and peers all contribute to the construction of this pressure-filled environment, in which learners are expected to sacrifice rest, social life, and mental well-being in pursuit of academic excellence.²⁸ The use of extra classes during weekends and holidays, while ostensibly designed to offer support, often turns into a regime of surveillance and performance. Learners are placed under a rigorous, relentless schedule, leaving little space for emotional expression or personal development. The human need for balance is systematically undermined by a system that rewards only continuous academic exertion.²⁹

From a psychoanalytic perspective, learners in this system are frequently objectified, reduced to vessels onto which the anxieties and aspirations of adults are projected. Rather than being seen as individuals navigating a critical developmental phase, learners become carriers of their families' and

²⁵ Laura J. Link and Radomir Ray Mitic, "Examining Grading Purpose and Practices: A Multivariate Analysis of Secondary Stakeholder Perceptions," *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice* 32, no. 3 (May 4, 2025): 336–54, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0969594X.2025.2534813>.

²⁶ C. Hirsch, "Attachment to the Social Construct of Success and the Myth of the 'Good College': Effects of Toxic Stress on Affluent Adolescents" (University of Pennsylvania, 2019).

²⁷ Sam Keast, "Neoliberal Wellbeing: Exploring the Culture of Psychological Meritocracy in Australian Schooling and Education" (Victoria University, 2021).

²⁸ C.C. Muchnick and J. B. Curtis, "The Parent Compass: Navigating Your Teen's Wellness and Academic Journey in Today's Competitive World," Hachette UK, 2020, https://books.google.co.za/books?hl=en&lr=&id=k2d4EAAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PT13&dq=Muchnick,+C.C.+and+Curtis,+J.+B.,+2020.+The+Parent+Compass:+Navigating+Your+Teen%27s+Wellness+and+Academic+Journey+in+Today%27s+Competitive+World&ots=vVc3spHpSO&sig=Jnx0-1oRY5GbpNmHbKO6661a0h8&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q&f=false.

²⁹ Maria José Quina Galdino et al., "Burnout among Nursing Students: A Mixed Method Study," *Investigación y Educación En Enfermería* 38, no. 1 (February 26, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.17533/udea.iee.v38n1e07>.

communities' hopes.³⁰ This objectification renders their emotional struggles invisible, with stress, anxiety, and self-doubt often misinterpreted as laziness or a lack of resilience. The consequences of this pressure extend beyond the immediate stress of examination preparation. Many learners become alienated from the learning process itself. Education is reduced to a mechanistic exercise of rote memorization, aimed at maximizing exam performance rather than fostering critical thinking, creativity, or intellectual curiosity. As a result, the matric examination risks becoming a performative ritual, more a checkpoint on a conveyor belt than a meaningful culmination of learning. This distortion of purpose is exacerbated by systemic issues: many learners enter Grade 12 lacking foundational literacy and numeracy skills, forcing them into a frantic catch-up mode that further emphasizes exam techniques over genuine comprehension.³¹

The emotional fallout from this culture is severe. Low academic performance, far from being understood as a product of structural inequalities or earlier learning gaps, is internalized by learners as a fixed part of their identity. This diminishes motivation, erodes self-confidence, and often leads to a destructive cycle of disengagement. Learners may withdraw socially, experience heightened anxiety, or fall into despair about their future. Increasingly, reports of anxiety disorders, depression, burnout, and even suicidal ideation among Grade 12 learners point to a mental health crisis within the schooling system.

Equally concerning is the mental health crisis quietly unfolding in schools. Anxiety, depression, burnout, and suicidal ideation are increasingly common among Grade 12 learners, yet these struggles remain largely unacknowledged in education policy and practice. Most schools lack the resources, infrastructure, and trained personnel to offer meaningful psychological support. Where counselling services do exist, they are often overstretched and underutilized, constrained by stigma and a lack of institutional priority. In many communities, cultural taboos around mental health further discourage learners from seeking help, leaving them isolated in their distress. This absence of support reflects a broader societal failure to prioritize emotional well-being in education. Current systems continue to privilege quantifiable outcomes, pass rates, university entrance statistics, and matric distinctions over the holistic development of learners. Yet emotional well-being is not a luxury; it is foundational to academic success and long-term personal growth.

In sum, the relentless emphasis on matric performance fosters a toxic schooling culture in which emotional suffering is normalized and even expected. Learners are caught in a system that demands perfection while offering little in the way of psychological support or compassionate understanding. Addressing this crisis requires not only investment in school-based mental health services but a fundamental shift in how academic success is defined and pursued. Only by acknowledging and alleviating the emotional burden on learners can stakeholders create an education system that nurtures resilient, confident, and mentally healthy individuals capable of realizing their full potential.

Crucially, this dynamic does not benefit learners either. While some may pass matric through this intensive final-year push, the quality of their learning remains compromised. Many pass with limited understanding, poor academic habits, and little readiness for tertiary education or the labour market. Thus, the system fails both its learners and its educators. The only way to break this cycle is to shift focus and resources toward the foundational phase of schooling. Early learning deficits must be identified and remediated as soon as they emerge.

This means strengthening the quality of teaching in Grades R to 9, ensuring accountability for poor teaching practices, and equipping lower-grade teachers with the training and support they need. Without this foundational shift, Grade 12 teachers will continue to bear an impossible burden, and the overall quality of education will remain stagnant.

In total, the current structure of the South African school system sets Grade 12 educators up for failure by tasking them with repairing years of cumulative academic neglect. Until systemic attention is

³⁰ Denis Sekiwu, "Social Alienation and Education Access for Indigenous Batwa Learners in Southwestern Uganda," *LWATI: A Journal of Contemporary Research* 22, no. 1 (2025): 19–38; Eunice Kolutsoe Moru and Motlatsi Mathunya, "A Constructivist Analysis of Grade 8 Learners' Errors and Misconceptions in Simplifying Mathematical Algebraic Expressions," *JRAMathEdu (Journal of Research and Advances in Mathematics Education)*, July 31, 2022, 130–44, <https://doi.org/10.23917/jramathedu.v7i3.16784>.

³¹ Bryan M. Dewsbury et al., "Inclusive and Active Pedagogies Reduce Academic Outcome Gaps and Improve Long-Term Performance," *PLOS ONE* 17, no. 6 (June 15, 2022): e0268620, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0268620>.

redirected toward early-grade learning, the vicious cycle of overwork, underperformance, and burnout will continue year after year, leaving both teachers and learners at a severe disadvantage.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Critical Social Theory, according to Ntshangase and Mathebula, emphasises freedom, transparency, respect for human dignity, kindness, and caring among all humans.³² Critical social theory (CST) is adopted as the theoretical framework for this study.³³ This framework allows for an analysis of the power dynamics and structural inequalities that shape the obsession with matric results.³⁴ By examining the role of the teacher, the learner, and the educational system through this lens, the study sheds light on how societal pressures and historical contexts influence the prioritization of matric results at the expense of broader educational goals. Critical social theory also allows for an understanding of how systemic issues, such as class and race, intersect with the education system to exacerbate the obsession with achieving high matric pass rates.³⁵

However, in this study, CST is read together with Freud's ideas of repetition compulsion, anxiety, and displacement, which help explain why teachers may fixate on Matric performance as a way to manage their own fears of failure and institutional collapse.³⁶ But since Freud's theory does not fully aid in understanding the problem of matric obsession and overworking in South Africa, CST is the most relevant lens for this study. The act of overworking learners, then, is not just an irrational response to policy incentives but also a manifestation of deeper psychic structures that relate to teachers' professional identities, unresolved frustrations, and fantasies of redemption.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative research approach, utilizing semi-structured interviews to gather data from a purposive sample consisting of 4 teachers, 6 learners, and 3 parents. The sample was purposively chosen to represent a cross-section of the school community involved in the matric process. The researchers firstly wrote a proposal about this study to the Turfloop Research & Ethics Committee (TREC) at the University of Limpopo, and an ethical clearance certificate was issued with reference TREC/804/2024: PG. With that certificate, permission was sought at the Limpopo Department of Education, and permission was granted. Then, with both permission documents, researchers went on to seek permission in 4 schools through their principals, deputy principals, and departmental heads. Prior to arranging interviews with participants, researchers assured all participants that the data collected from them would only be used for this study and would be protected from any other party. It was also made clear to all that all participants have the right to withdraw at any time they want without any consequences, and even during interviews, they have the right to refuse to answer some questions.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore the perspectives of teachers, learners, and parents regarding the overemphasis on Grade 12 exams and the consequences of such an obsession. The data collected was analysed thematically, allowing the researchers to identify common patterns and themes related to the psychoanalytic and social implications of the obsession with matric results. Confidentiality of participants was secured through the anonymisation process, whereby they are represented with codes such as P1, P2, P3, and so on. Reliability, confirmability, and trustworthiness were ensured through recording the interviews with an Android phone and playing the recordings back to the participants for confirmation. This work was also presented at the SASE REGIONAL CONFERENCE held on the 1st August 2025 at the University of Limpopo for contributions from other

³² Mohammed Xolile Ntshangase and Nkarhi Mathebula, "Self-Harm in the Public Spaces While Trying to Embrace Indigenous Languages in South African Context," *International Journal Of Humanities Education and Social Sciences (IJHESS)* 4, no. 5 (April 26, 2025), <https://doi.org/10.55227/ijhess.v4i5.1484>.

³³ Mohammed Xolile Ntshangase, "Exploration of Philosophical and Legal Reasons for Inclusion of Academic Freedom in the Bill of Rights," *Artha Journal of Social Sciences* 24, no. 2 (2025): 57.

³⁴ Patricia Hill Collins et al., "Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory," *Contemporary Political Theory* 20, no. 3 (September 17, 2021): 690–725, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41296-021-00490-0>.

³⁵ Emmanuel Renault, "Critical Theory, Social Critique and Knowledge," *Critical Horizons* 21, no. 3 (July 2, 2020): 189–204, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14409917.2020.1790750>.

³⁶ Sanford Gifford, "Repetition Compulsion," *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association* 12, no. 3 (July 1, 1964): 632–49, <https://doi.org/10.1177/000306516401200313>.

academics. Psychoanalysis theory as the entry to this discussion influences the themes of this study as it unveils the mental and psychological issues that are brought by the obsession with matric results.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

Research locale includes Capricorn, Sekhukhune, and Vhembe districts in Limpopo province. Participants in this study were 4 teachers, 6 learners, and 3 parents from the abovementioned districts within Limpopo province. Semi-structured interviews were conducted using their home languages (whenever and wherever) they chose. The table below gives more information about participants without exposing them to any possible harm.

Table 1: Participants' information

Participants (P)	Occupation	School name	District
P1	Teacher	Ditlaleseso High School	Capricorn
P2	Teacher	Mmanare High School	Capricorn
P3	Teacher	Masalanabo High School	Mopani
P4	Teacher	Kgalatlou High School	Sekhukhune
P5	Learner	Kgalatlou High School	Sekhukhune
P6	Learner	Kgalatlou High School	Sekhukhune
P7	Learner	Mmanare High School	Capricorn
P8	Learner	Mmanare High School	Capricorn
P9	Learner	Masalanbo High School	Mopani
P10	Learner	Ditlaleseso High School	Capricorn
P11	Parent	Masalanbo High School	Mopani
P12	Parent	Ditlaleseso High School	Capricorn
P13	Parent	Mmanare High School	Capricorn

The questions put forward across all participants were (i) what causes the overworking of teachers and learners in grade 12? (ii) what happens to other school grades when all focus is directed towards grade 12? (iii) does matric results obsession really pressurise teachers and learners? (iv) Are there any side effects to the matric results pressure? The main objective is to find answers to what can be done to decrease the matric stress in South African high schools

P1 & P3:

“In South African schools, grade 12 is a big grade, and the results get to be published in newspapers. Even the minister of basic education presents results on public television, and schools' performance is measured based on those results. Other grades below matric do not usually attract the same attention as grade 12, and much attention is necessarily paid to those results. So, other grades receive less attention than grade 12. Department of Basic Education puts pressure on teachers and learners, as a good matric pass-rate proves the functionality of the school. The side effects for us teachers are that we end up not having family time due to having extra classes.”

P4 & P2:

“Department of Basic Education and social media are the causes of the pressure towards obtaining a high pass-rate in grade 12 of all South African schools. Other grades, like grade 8 to grade 11, are less pressurised than grade 12; they are taught moderately. The obsession over good matric results does put pressure on teachers and learners, as there are morning classes, afternoon classes, and weekend classes. Learners and teachers of grade 12 do not have any life outside the school, and that makes them scarce at homes or any celebrations.”

P5, P7 & P8:

“Teachers, media, and our families do put pressure on us to pass matric because there is a belief that passing grade 12 opens doors of success. Other grades have a more manageable workload than grade 12, and that means they also get taught, but within normal school hours. At matric, we end up not able to do anything besides studying.”

P6, P11 & P9:

“Seemingly, the whole South African education system invests in grade 12, and those learners are viewed as national heroes; that view is basically what puts the whole pressure on teachers and learners. Parents and the media pressure schools to obtain a higher pass rate in matric. Other grades are also taught, but much attention is directed towards grade 12.”

P10, P12 & P13:

“As parents, we can say that the whole community pushes that grade 12 learners must have more schoolwork. At home, we even excuse them from doing chores because we want them to succeed in life. We do not understand any pressure put on our children by schoolwork because no parent wants his/ her child to be part of the statistics of matric failure. The side effects are that they are less available at home, and they are always consumed by their studies. However, that is good because our community schools end up being highly respected and rated among the best performing schools in the country.”

Obsession with high matric pass-rate is real

According to all participants in this study, matric pressure for obtaining a high pass-rate at the end of the year cannot be denied. This is similar to what Dewsbury et al found, that matric learners face a tedious situation whereby their life revolves around schoolwork, and they even get deprived of their friendship celebrations.³⁷ The causes of this matric results pressure include the Department of Basic Education (DBE), communities, as well as public media.³⁸ According to Jansen, this obsession with matric results in South African schools has been there for a long time, and it has even become normal for everyone.³⁹ In fact, in some communities, some learners even commit suicide when they fail matric after overexerting themselves in this extensive studying for the whole year.⁴⁰ Although learning happens in other grades as well, at grade 12, it is as if learners were not learning in those other grades, as **P5, P6, and P8** narrate. As participants presented their views, there seemed to be a sense in which passing matric is considered the climax of basic education, which must necessarily be obtained at all costs. Therefore, this study establishes that the strife for a higher pass rate at grade 12 inflicts pressure on both teachers and learners.

Matric results obsession gets overwhelming, and the DBE perpetrates it.

Teachers commit themselves to having no life outside the school when they take the responsibility to teach grade 12, and by so doing, they sacrifice their lives for teaching even beyond normal notional hours.⁴¹ According to Golam, the nation needs to have tangible results in order to report in public media that it is progressive and developing.⁴² Learners need to be pushed for them to obtain that good pass-rate for the school, and their sacrifice of social life is worth it because the future will be better.⁴³ From the participants' views, it seems that parents do not see any negativity in their children being subjected to extreme study pressure due to the hope it brings. The crux of the matter is that the obsession with a higher pass rate of grade 12 in South African schools is real, and everyone has accepted that it is what learners must pass through. However, this study argues that the overworking of teachers and learners at

³⁷ Dewsbury et al., “Inclusive and Active Pedagogies Reduce Academic Outcome Gaps and Improve Long-Term Performance.”

³⁸ Mehmet Ulker, “Educational System and Media Content in the Republic of South Africa,” *Educational Research and Reviews* 14, no. 15 (September 30, 2019): 533–40, <https://doi.org/10.5897/ERR2019.3777>.

³⁹ Madri S Jansen van Rensburg, “Engaging Children to Make Evaluation Products More Child-Focused,” *African Evaluation Journal* (AOSIS, 2024).

⁴⁰ ENCA News, “2020 Matric Results | Dealing Depression and Teen Suicide,” YouTube, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8RXSH-FDDlo>.

⁴¹ Zona Ndamase and Mohammed Xolile Ntshangase, “The Impact of Basic Education Curriculum Gaps on Meeting Tertiary Education Admission Criteria – A Case of South Africa,” *Journal of Education and Learning Technology*, July 15, 2025, 449–58, <https://doi.org/10.38159/jelt.2025673>.

⁴² M. Golam, “Parenting Advice: Supporting Your Matric Child through Final Exams,” Expresso Show, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VdhdGCyr3OE>.

⁴³ Nastassja Philippou, Ritesh Ajoodha, and Ashwini Jadhav, “Using Machine Learning Techniques and Matric Grades to Predict the Success of First Year University Students,” in *2020 2nd International Multidisciplinary Information Technology and Engineering Conference (IMITEC)* (IEEE, 2020), 1–5, <https://doi.org/10.1109/IMITEC50163.2020.9334087>.

grade 12 causes stress, tiredness, negative portrayal of matric, and depression if learners fail after so much exertion.

Parents accept that their children endure pressure and stress

Parents are aware of the pressure put on teachers and learners by matric results in South African schools, but they consider it necessary. It seems that for them, there is no problem with their children disconnecting from their social lives, as De Han narrates.⁴⁴ According to Mncube, the social life of matric learners does not lead to any better future than education or good pass grades at grade 12.⁴⁵ Some parents argue that their children get more occupied by a good thing, as they get engrossed in their studies, rather than being hooked on drugs and playfulness.⁴⁶ According to P1, “*some parents even accompany their children to schools during evenings because they support that schools must obtain a high pass-rate at grade 12.*” Some parents even report that they support this matric study pressure because when learners pass matric with good grades, they then get a good chance for admission into universities.⁴⁷

This study reveals a stark contrast in perspectives regarding the focus on Grade 12 results. Teachers, while acknowledging the strain of overworking learners, often justify their actions by asserting that the pressure is necessary to achieve high pass rates, which are seen as critical for both the school's reputation and learners' future opportunities. However, learners express feelings of resentment and anxiety, citing the overwhelming workload, extra lessons during holidays and weekends, and the lack of support for their emotional and psychological well-being. Parents, while generally supportive of the push for better results, also express concern for their children's health and well-being. The overemphasis on matric results perpetuates a harmful cycle where the focus on cramming and last-minute preparation creates an environment that is not conducive to long-term learning and growth. This intense focus on exams does not allow learners to engage in deep, meaningful learning that is necessary for their development and future success.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this study point to the need for a paradigm shift in how South African schools approach the matric examination and overall educational outcomes. Rather than viewing the Grade 12 year as the culmination of a learner's academic career, it is essential to see matric preparation as a continuous process that should begin in earlier grades. Schools must create a balanced approach that integrates exam preparation throughout the entire school journey, ensuring that learners are equipped for matric without the need for extreme measures like excessive extra lessons and cramming. Additionally, there should be greater emphasis on the emotional and psychological well-being of learners, as the pressure to perform can have detrimental effects on their mental health. Schools and educators must also be given more training on how to manage learner stress and burnout while maintaining a focus on academic excellence.

CONCLUSION

The obsession with high matric pass rates in South African high schools presents a dangerous cycle that overburdens both teachers and learners, often with detrimental results. The practice of concentrating all resources and energy into Grade 12 learners while ignoring other grades creates an unsustainable model for education, reinforcing a system that values exam results over true learning. This study contributes a critical perspective on the negative psychological and educational consequences of such an obsession, while calling for a more holistic, long-term approach to education that prioritizes learner well-being and sustainable academic development. Addressing this issue requires a systemic change that redefines the purpose of education in South Africa, shifting away from an examination-focused culture to one that values comprehensive learning and supports learners at every stage of their academic journey.

⁴⁴ S. De Han, “SACAP Parents' Guide to Matric Support 2025 | Webinar. YouTube.,” 2022.

⁴⁵ N. Mncube, “Parents of Helpmekaar College Matriculants React to Results,” SABC News, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RzfYmv3rAfk>.

⁴⁶ N. Gwarube, “2024 Matric Results | Limpopo to Release 2024 Matric Results,” SABC News, 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3_slvK82tIw.

⁴⁷ SABC News, “2024 Matric Results | Class of 2024 Achieves Highest Ever Pass Rate,” YouTube, 2024.

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ABOUT AUTHORS

Ramasela Phuti Mokgotho holds a Bachelor of Education and an Honours degree in Education and is currently completing a master's degree in Education. She is a dedicated and motivated researcher with a strong interest in educational development and academic inquiry. Ms Mokgotho is passionate about improving learning outcomes and addressing challenges within the education system, particularly in diverse and under-resourced contexts. Through her academic journey, she has developed strong skills in research, critical thinking, and academic writing. Her work reflects a commitment to lifelong learning and the application of knowledge to real-world educational issues. Ms Mokgotho aims to contribute meaningfully to the field of education through research and practice, with a focus on promoting equity, access, and quality education for all learners.

Mohammed Xolile Ntshangase holds a PhD (Philosophy) from the University of KwaZulu-Natal. As he always believed that sharing his knowledge and perspectives with others brings more pleasure, Mohammed enjoys sharing his views with fellow academics from different fields. He is currently affiliated with the University of Limpopo in the Department of Education Studies, wherein he serves as a senior lecturer of Philosophy & Psychology of Education. His areas of research interest are: African philosophy, philosophy of education, psychology of education, and gender studies. He has attended and presented papers in 14 academic conferences, including national and international ones, and he has more than 70 publications in DHET-accredited journals. Among his ambitions, Mohammed wishes and works towards being a global scholar renowned in different areas/ disciplines with his polymathic approach to research, which has attracted researchers to collaborate with him nationally and abroad. Mohammed believes that the interconnectedness of knowledge and the cry for interdisciplinarity and multidisciplinary in research nowadays cannot be ignored. His scholarly awards include the VC's 2023 best teacher award and 2024 best researcher award in the SoE (UL).

Nkarhi Excellent Mathebula graduated with a BA degree at the then University of the North (Now University of Limpopo) in 1996. Because he has always wanted to become a teacher, he enrolled for a Higher Education Diploma (HED), which he obtained the same year. He went to further his studies, wherein he completed a Bed Honours in 1997. In pursuit of knowledge, he went on to register for a Master's degree in Adult Education, which was later conferred in 2014. In the year 2021, Nkarhi Excellent obtained a PhD in Adult Education from the University of Limpopo. Nkarhi Excellent Mathebula is presently affiliated with the University of Limpopo under the Department of Education Studies, serving as a Senior Lecturer of Adult Education, Philosophy of Education, and Teaching Practice. He has presented papers in six (6) academic conferences and has published 26 articles in DHET-accredited journals. Among his many ambitions, Nkarhi Excellent Mathebula wishes to educate Adult Community Education lecturers with the aim of reskilling adults who are neither in Education, Employment, nor Training (NEET).