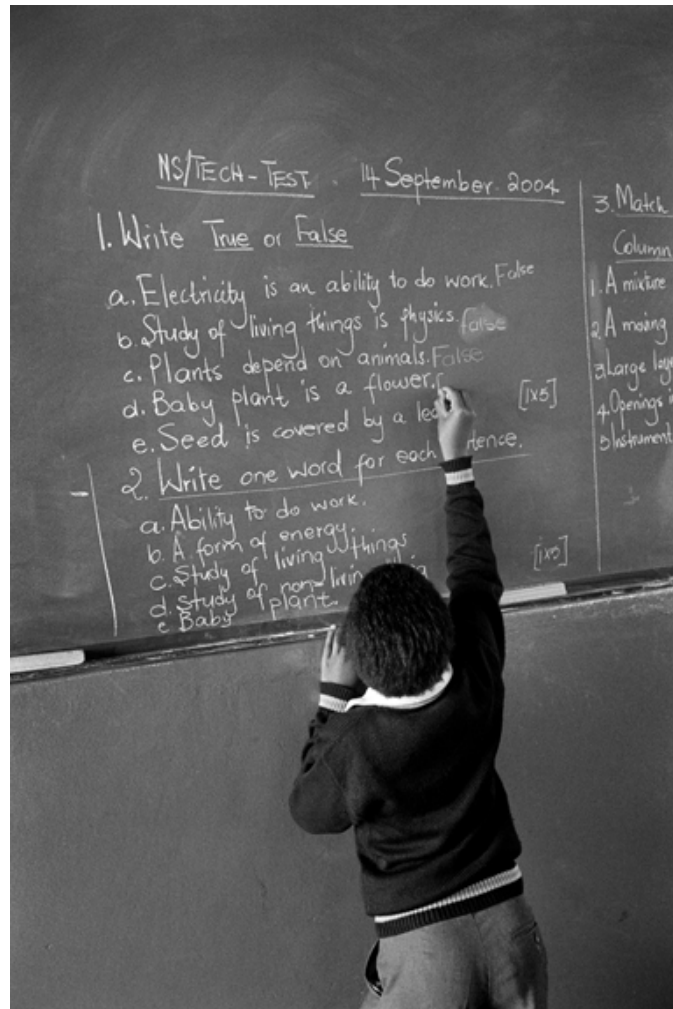


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"ALMOST A BOSS-BOY": FARM SCHOOLS, FARM LIFE AND SOCIAL OPPORTUNITY IN SOUTH AFRICA

A draft research report for discussion



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I INTRODUCTION

This report is the first output of an ongoing research project aimed at exploring the state of education for black children in South Africa's commercial farming areas. Its focus is on the lived reality of children, parents and educators in South Africa's farm schools and on the social roles played by farm schools in commercial farm labouring communities.

This edition of the report is a work in progress released for comment.¹ It is intended to stimulate debate about South African farm schooling. It sets out the state of farm schools as we found them in two provinces and uncovers, in outline, the manner in which farm schools, as they stand, help sustain rural power relations inherited from apartheid. The findings we make are provocative, but are, in our opinion, justified by what we found in the 43 farm schools we visited in two provinces. While they are not representative of the total population of farm schools in any formal statistical sense, they amount to a fair representation of the state of South African farm schooling and raise questions which all those concerned with rural education have an interest in answering. Our conclusions and recommendations section in this edition of the report is deliberately sparse in order to encourage comment on and debate about the text.

At the core of the report is a research strategy which seeks to compare and contrast sets of farm schools in two provinces. The aim of the comparison was to establish the main external variables in terms of which farm school performance can be explained. We grouped these together under three themes. First, we considered the resources available to farm schools in each of the two provinces. Second, we considered the effectiveness of the provincial department of education in ensuring the implementation of school-based policies on governance (for example, ensuring the functionality of school governing bodies and eradicating corporal punishment), and in taking steps to ensure that farm children are able and encouraged to access public education (for example, by providing scholar transport and rolling out school feeding schemes). Third, we considered the social role played by the farm school in the broader farming community. This encompassed establishing the relationship between

¹ The report was researched and written by Jackie Dugard, Abraham Mintoor, Muzi Ngwenya, Portia Nkosi and Stuart Wilson. Cover Photograph: Jürgen Schadeberg. Comments, questions and suggestions are welcome at farmschools@law.wits.ac.za.

farm school, farm production and farm worker households. These broad themes informed our review of the available literature on farm schools, which underpins sections II and III of the report. They also informed our primary research across 43 schools in the Western Cape and Mpumalanga, the results of which are presented in sections IV and V.

We employed a qualitative, case-based strategy to investigate the themes and the links between them in each school. Each school was taken as a single interpretative whole. Semi-structured interviews with principals, educators and farmers were supplemented by focus groups with learners to draw out the perceived links between resources, policy management and implementation and social context on the one hand and educational achievement and social mobility on the other. In the Western Cape we interviewed provincial department of education officials responsible for rural schooling. Unfortunately, and despite repeated requests, no-one from the Mpumalanga department of education was prepared to discuss farm schools at length with us. From our brief conversations with several officials in the Mpumalanga department it appeared to us that no single unit or person at a senior level had specific responsibility for farm schools.

For the purposes of this study ‘educational achievement’ was defined as the educational progress made by farm school learners after leaving the farm schooling system. In common with the vast majority of farm schools nationwide, all those we visited were primary schools. Many only catered for their learners up to the end of Grade 3. Consequently, educational achievement was often measured in terms of progression to and through the secondary school grades. ‘Social mobility’ was defined as the frequency, range and quality of occupations achieved by farm school learners, beyond low-skilled agricultural labour. There are currently no quantitative data available on either the educational achievements or the social mobility of farm school learners, and most of the schools we visited did not keep detailed records of learner destinations. We were therefore required to rely on the reports of school governors and experienced teachers in gleaning this information. We recognise that a more detailed ‘tracer’ study across an appropriate sample of schools is desirable. We are considering such a study in future.

Identification of sample schools

The most challenging aspect of our field research was the identification and maintenance of a sample of farm schools. The ones we chose, especially those in Mpumalanga, were predominantly small, remote and very difficult to find. In Mpumalanga, even provincial department of education officials and some teachers at neighbouring schools were unable to tell us exactly where specific farm schools were located. Consequently, for every hour we spent at a school conducting our research, we spent approximately two hours travelling.

We visited each school in our sample at least once. On the first visit we interviewed the principal and, based on the interview, we constructed a brief profile of the school. A typical profile is reproduced in Box 1.



Learners at a farm school in Mpumalanga, 2005. Photograph: Jurgen Schadeberg

BOX 1
A Typical School Profile²

Name of School	Principal and Teacher	Contact	Type of farming
XXX Primary School	Ms XXX and Ms XXX	082 123 4567	Sugar cane

- The school was established in 1974 by the then farmer.
- The principal has been with the school for four years.
- There are 112 enrolled learners who are spread between grade 1 and grade 7.
- There are 3 educators (including the principal). All classes are multi-graded.
- The school services 4 farms.
- The longest distance that children travel is approximately 7 km each way. This distance is travelled by a total of 29 children.
- There is no scholar transport for these children.
- The principal says that the school has requested assistance from the Department of Education a number of times but has never been successful.
- The school does have a feeding scheme supply which feeds all children in the school daily.
- Sometimes there are delays in the feeding scheme and children have to stay without food for up to two weeks.
- The food supplied consists of beans, soya and pap.
- The school has an elected SGB but it does not function.
- None of the 112 children pays school fees despite a policy requiring them to pay an annual fee of R30.00.
- There has never been a formal application for school fees exemption.
- Unavailability of scholar transport and retrenchment of parents adversely affect enrolment and are a major reason why children drop out. The number of children at the school falls each year.
- The migration of parents from farm to farm and the return of some to their rural homes – largely in Mozambique – also affects the number of children.
- According to the principal the school could service about 50 more children but this is prevented by the lack of transport.
- The farm is currently owned by XXX (a sugar company) which assists the school with funds (up to R3 000 pa) and other facilities such the computer, the supply of toilet paper.
- The school also receives a government subsistence allowance of R10 000 pa which is largely used for staff travel (work-related) and repairs.
- Also, the farmer provides free water and electricity for the school. Other than that, there is little involvement or interference from the owners of the farm.

We then selected a smaller number of schools in each province and visited them again. The second visit consisted of:

- a focus group discussion with learners;

² Note that all identifying features have been changed or deleted.

- an interview with the farm owner (where possible);
- an interview with a member of the school's governing body;
- an interview with an educator;
- an interview with a parent.

We also distributed diaries to participants in the focus groups and asked them to record their daily lives over a two-week period. We hoped, in this way, to access the experiences of farm children at first hand. Narratives reflecting the experiences recorded in the diaries we collected have been integrated into our analysis and findings.

II FARM SCHOOLS IN CONTEXT: HISTORICAL AND THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

Very little systematic, theoretically informed research is available on the South African farm schools sector. What little there is tends to predate 1994. The key sociological texts remain Bill Nasson's 1984 study of farm schooling in the Western Cape³, Pam Christie and Margaret Gaganakis's 1989 analysis of the role of farm schools in state-society relations⁴ and Johann de Graaf's study of farm schools in the Hex River Valley area of the Western Cape, completed in 1990⁵. These texts tell us that the manner in which farm schools were created and managed during the apartheid era has left a unique and complex legacy of problems.

Most of the obstacles to delivering education to African children on commercial farms spring from two root causes:

- their dependence on, and often their vulnerability to, the farmer on whose land they are built; and
- the fact that they are often the most extreme examples of indigence in the South African education system.

³ B Nasson *Bitter Harvest: Farm Schooling for Black South Africans* (1984).

⁴ P Christie and M Gaganakis 'Farm Schools in South Africa: The Face of Rural apartheid' 1 *Comparative Education Review* 33 (1989) 77-92.

⁵ J de Graaf, W Louw and M van der Merwe *Farm Schools in the Western Cape: A Sociological Analysis* (1990).

This pattern of poverty and dependence was first established by the Bantu Education Act, which provided for a range of subsidies to compensate a farmer for the costs of accommodating a school on his land, and a policy framework intended to facilitate the sharing of responsibility for the school between the state and the farmer. State subsidies covered half the cost of buildings and provision of utilities and paid the teachers. The farmer provided the land, half the building costs (reduced to 25 per cent in 1989) and either managed the school himself or nominated someone else to do so.

This arrangement benefited both state and farm owner. It extended the state's control over the African population, providing for a more complete penetration of apartheid ideology by ensuring that the limited Bantu education curriculum was taught in even the most remote rural areas. Government and farmer alike also hoped that establishing farm schools would give African labourers an incentive to remain in rural areas rather than to try to move to the cities in search of better living conditions and higher wages. In his oft-quoted speech on Bantu education to the 1954 state Senate, HF Verwoerd set out the then government's attitude to the education of African children in white rural areas:

If fundamental education can also be obtained on the farms the trek from the farms will be combated, more especially if the training contributes towards more remunerative employment in farm work owing to the greater skill and usefulness of the workers.⁶

Although the Bantu Education Act for the first time established a framework in which state resources could be allocated to African education in rural areas, the total resources allocated, in common with those directed to all African schools across South Africa at the time, were still hopelessly inadequate.

In practice few farmers had much reason to ensure that their schools were provided with anything more than the most basic facilities. Contrary to Verwoerd's purported vision of more skilled and 'useful' workers, most farmers' sentiments seem to have been summed up by the comments made by one Stellenbosch landlord, cited in Bill Nasson's study, *Bitter Harvest*:

⁶ Quoted in Karodia et al *The Rural Landscape and Farm schools in South Africa* a paper presented to the National Conference on Farm Schools, 14 May 2000.

It's all very well to have gone to school, but that doesn't mean that you'll make a reliable tractor driver.⁷

Like the state, almost all farmers saw farm schools as a way of extending their control over a half-educated labour supply, rather than providing farm labourers' children with marketable technical skills.

Historically, then, farm schools have been seen as simply one manifestation of the racial-capitalist social relations which sustained apartheid.⁸ South African farmers were a key part of the Afrikaner Nationalist coalition which came to power in 1948. Agricultural capital therefore played a pivotal role in constructing the apartheid labour law regime in such a way as to provide them with a cheap and immobile labour force. Farm workers were excluded from that apartheid era legislation which set out minimum health standards and working conditions: the Labour Relations Act, the Wage Act, the Basic Conditions of Employment Act and the Unemployment Insurance Act. Farm workers under apartheid were generally badly paid, badly treated, and worked long hours with no rights to time off, paid overtime, safe conditions or medical treatment. Apartheid era influx controls prevented many farm workers from moving to towns to look for work; apartheid era labour bureaux regulated the employment of black people; and once categorised as a farm labourer, a black worker could not change his/her category of work unless there was a surplus of farm labour or his/her employer consented.⁹ This regime trapped farm labourers in a highly dependent relationship with farmers. With few formal rights, whatever significant sphere of autonomy or level of material comfort a farm labourer could expect was substantially a result of the largesse of the farmer.

Farm schools were essentially 'a reflection and an extension of this control situation'¹⁰. Farm schools almost never provided education beyond the primary level, giving farm school children little hope of competing in the urban labour market, and thus ensuring the reproduction of a rural labour force. The schools also provided a source of cheap (or free) labour during busy times of the year, such as the harvest – they were often closed down for days and weeks at a time during the harvest season.

⁷ B Nasson (note 3 above).

⁸ See P Christie and M Gaganakis (note 4 above) 92.

⁹ Ibid 79.

¹⁰ Ibid 88.

While the practice of child labour on farms was outlawed in 1986, the apartheid government did little to enforce the prohibition.

Farm schools could not be established without the consent of the farmer. However, once constructed, the farmer became the sole owner of the school buildings. The farmer's obligation to the state was limited to allowing the school to function for five years, failing which he would be required to pay the school's construction subsidy back. The farmer and the state would nominate a school manager, usually the farmer himself, his spouse, or a local minister of religion. A farm school was intended for the education of the children of labourers employed on the farm on which it was situated. Children from neighbouring farms required the permission of 'their farmer' and the farm school's manager to attend.

Schooling for the children of African labourers on white-owned commercial farms therefore became 'a voluntary act of benevolence on the farmer's part, rather than a legal entitlement of children'¹¹. This reality has led some writers to analyse farm schools almost completely in terms of the feudal power relationships said to exist on apartheid era farms. Bill Nasson's study¹² characterises commercial farms as 'total' or 'hungry' institutions, which, like boarding schools or prisons, were largely closed off from wider society. Within their confines a farmer maintained his domination through the tight regulation of his workers' lives. Precisely because farm labourers had little access to the outside world, they were unable to acquire standards of comparison that would allow them to become conscious of the hardships they endured.

The apartheid era farm school was, to Nasson, one expression of the paternalistic relationship between a farmer and his labourers. A landowner's decision to establish and help maintain a farm school was, essentially, one of a number of 'gifts' by which he asserted both his power and his benevolence. The 'gift relationship' was a way of reinforcing the farmer's role as provider and patriarch and his labourers' position as supplicants or perpetual children. Although this perspective on farm schools has been heavily (and correctly) criticised for its erroneous assertion that farm workers under apartheid had little by way of access to ideological forms other than feudal paternalism, and for exaggerating a farmer's dominance over his

¹¹ Ibid 84.

¹² Note 3 above.

workers,¹³ its analysis of the farm school as *a means to further* a farmer's level of social control is apt.

Beyond the legislative and policy framework which made them an instrument of agricultural capital's need for a cheap, semi-literate labour supply, farm schools were also subject to severe resource constraints. Few had electricity, running water telephones, toilets, sports fields or adequate teaching aids.¹⁴ Under apartheid, farm schools had the highest pupil drop-out rates, the least qualified teachers, and the lowest levels of state funding, even within the very badly funded African education system. Because of the ultra-low wages farm labourers earned (especially up to the end of the 1970s), they were unable to contribute much materially to the quality of the facilities available in their children's schools. Long hours, grinding poverty and already low levels of literacy amongst farm labourers precluded many other forms of parental involvement in school life, such as the voluntary provision of labour or assistance with school management.

The link between the socio-economic conditions of farm labouring communities and learner achievement in the schools that served them was a strong one. Although he perhaps overstates the case, there is something to de Graaf's assertion that a farm school learner's chances of real educational achievement had already been determined at the beginning of his/her first year of formal education.¹⁵ Reception classes, playgroups and preschools were non-existent on farms.

Finally, the sheer geographical dispersal of farm schools in rural areas, coupled with little or no provision of scholar transport, made access to the schools extremely difficult. 'Crushing' walks of 10 to 30 km to school were not uncommon.¹⁶

State funding of farm schools, legal protections for farm workers and farm worker wages did improve in the 1980s as the alliance between a more reform-minded government and conservative agricultural capital weakened. State subventions to farm schools became more generous. As de Graaf notes, learner retention in farm schools for coloured children in the Western Cape improved.¹⁷ But there is little evidence that these developments had any significant impact on educational achievement amongst farm school children. Deteriorating relations between state and

¹³ J de Graaf et al (note 5 above) 2.

¹⁴ Ibid 1.

¹⁵ Ibid 47.

¹⁶ Ibid 45.

¹⁷ Ibid.

the agricultural sector were also responsible for an increase in farm school closures during the 1980s. Between 1980 and 1984, for example, farmers closed some 170 schools.¹⁸

By the end of apartheid, it seemed clear what had to be done to improve the quality of education in farm schools.

1. Levels of state financing of and capital investment in the schools had to be increased.
2. Complete state control of farm schools had to be established.
3. Poverty and the social and job insecurity of farm labourers had to be addressed.
4. Farm children required more access to pre- and post-primary education.

What does the available literature tell us about the progress made in achieving these objectives?

III FARM SCHOOLS SINCE 1994

Despite significant legislative and policy reform throughout the education sector since 1996, a 2004 Human Rights Watch Report on South African farm schools could still assert, with some justification, that:

The South African government is failing to protect the right to a primary education for children living on commercial farms by neither ensuring their access to farm schools nor maintaining the adequacy of learning conditions at these schools . . . The historical, social and economic conditions on commercial farms, inherited from years of an undemocratic minority government, mean that farm schools . . . are among the poorest in financial resources, physical structure and quality in South Africa. Farm children attend schools without electricity, drinking water, sanitation, suitable

¹⁸ Gaganakis and Crewe *Farm schools in South Africa* (1984) 5.

buildings or adequate materials. Also children may face harassment from farm owners . . .¹⁹

The Human Rights Watch Report proceeds as if little has changed on farms and in their schools after 1994. In terms of the quality of teaching and learning in farm schools and the adequacy of the resources afforded to them, this may be true. But the years since 1994 have seen significant developments both in the education sector and on South African farms. However, the impact of these developments on access to quality education for farm children is at best ambiguous. Three major developments must be noted: education law and policy reform, the worsening relationship between white agricultural capital and the state, and the so-called ‘new wave’ of land dispossession in South Africa. Each is addressed below.

Post-apartheid education law and policy reform

Since 1996, the government’s policy has aimed to pull farm schools out of the curious interstice they have traditionally occupied between the state and the private sector. The South African Schools Act 1996 (SASA), which followed the 1995 Hunter Committee’s recommendations on school organisation, funding and ownership, implied that all farm schools would be transferred into public hands.²⁰

The report recommended that the state take full control of farm schools, so that ownership of property would no longer imply control over the way the schools were run. In common with all other state-aided schools, school governing bodies (SGBs) made up of parents, teachers and representatives of the local community now (nominally, at least) run farm schools. In particular, the Act states that a public school will only be allowed to operate on private land in terms of an agreement signed between the relevant provincial Member of the Executive Committee (MEC) for Education and the property owner. This agreement should, at a minimum, include provisions guaranteeing a farm school security of tenure, access and occupation, along with an acknowledgement of the owner’s rights. The SASA provides for the

¹⁹ Human Rights Watch *Forgotten Schools: the Right to Basic Education for Children on Farms in South Africa* (2004) 1.

²⁰ Department of Education *Report of the Committee to Review the Organisation, Governance and Funding of Schools* (1995).

agreement to be binding over successive owners if the land is sold. The SASA also sets out the conditions under which:

- a farm school can be closed;
- educational rights on a piece of land can be registered on title deeds of property; and
- farm school land can be expropriated.

Regulations on the content of the MEC/owner agreement provided for in the SASA were set out in December 1997. The terms of any agreement were to include:

- a description of the parties drawing up the agreement;
- regulations concerning the opening and closure of schools;
- the provision of education and performance of a public school's normal functions;
- governance;
- security of access, maintenance and improvement of school buildings and property, and the supply of necessary services;
- arrangements for compensation for improvements to immovable property; and
- the protection of a farm owner's rights to be paid for the use of property and any services provided.

The regulations require the school governing body to be consulted before any agreement is signed. For as long as it takes for a new agreement to be concluded, farm schools continue to function under whatever agreements were reached under apartheid, in so far as these are consistent with the Constitution. The Regulations require that all agreements prohibit owner interference with the 'normal educational activities' of the school. Nor must the owner be allowed to restrict access to a school by a 'learner, educator, parent, worker at the school, member of the governing body,

officer or member of the public who has a reasonable interest in the activities of the school'.²¹

The SASA had envisaged that all MEC/owner agreements would be signed within six months of the Act's enforcement. However, by 2000, 88 per cent of farm schools remained unprotected by an agreement and were therefore still in limbo between state and private control. As mentioned above, in terms of the SASA, until a MEC/owner agreement has been signed, the legal status of farm schools is uncertain.

The legal limbo perpetuated by the failure to implement the aspects of the SASA relating to farm schools has real consequences for farm school improvements. It is far from clear that governing bodies have been prepared to raise funds for improvements or equipment while they have been uncertain that they actually have secure legal title to the school. In reality, they remain vulnerable to arbitrary closure by, and interference from, the farm owner.

Under s 58 of the SASA, if an agreement cannot be reached under s 14 a provincial MEC may expropriate the land on which a public school stands. At the time of writing, these powers have never been used.

It is difficult to see how beneficial and lasting development can take place until the status of a farm school is determined one way or the other. The available evidence suggests that most farm schools remain hostage to the goodwill of farm owners. Submissions to the South African National NGO Coalition (SANGOCO) Poverty Hearings suggest that some farmers still abuse their power over farm schools. Veronica Kekesi testified at the hearings in North West Province that: 'On the farms there is a struggle with schools. The Boers say that the children are dirtying the place.' Nonene Nzuzo gave evidence to the Eastern Cape hearings suggesting that disputes between farm schools and landowners often result in school closures.²² The difficulties faced by farm schools which lack secure legal tenure are set out in two cases studies from Limpopo province contained in Box 2.

²¹ 'Regulations Relating to the Minimum Requirements of an Agreement Between the Member of the Executive Council and the Owner of a Property on which a Public School is Situated' *Government Gazette* 390 18566 19 December 1997.

²² S Liebenberg and K Pillay *Poverty and Human Rights: Poverty Hearings Background Paper* (1998) 40.

BOX 2

Farm Schools and Insecure Land Tenure in Limpopo Province

Mareletsane

One of many examples of farmer interference with access to farm schools was brought to light in 2003 when the School Governing Body of Mareletsane Primary School, a farm school near Ellisras, sought a High Court interdict restraining Johannes Coetzee, a farm owner, from interfering with access to the school. In early 2003, Coetzee erected a two and a half metre fence around Mareletsane to enclose a new game farm, extending some children's journeys to school from 3km to 20km. Coetzee also allegedly threatened to shoot some children who had resorted to cutting holes in the fence to gain access to the shorter route.

Mareletsane's School Governing Body also sued the Provincial and National Departments of Education for failing in their duty to safeguard Mareletsane's learners' access to education. The case was ultimately settled when Coetzee agreed to build a gate in the fence to allow children access to school.

Doreen Bridge

Landowner sensitivities around the land reform process are one source of reluctance to sign Section 14 Agreements. Doreen Bridge Combined School, for example, caters for well over 150 learners across nine grades. It has neither running water nor electricity. There is no transport available for learners with long distances to travel to school. One grade is taught in a half-built classroom with neither roof nor floor and a three-foot wall on two and a half sides. Classrooms are hot and overcrowded. None has ceilings. Staff complain of severe textbook and teaching aid shortages, as well as endemic poverty in the local community. They estimate the average local labouring wage at R275 per month.

Doreen-Bridge has been promised improvements by the provincial Department of Education if a Section 14 Agreement could be secured. The land owner is, however, unwilling to sign any agreement with the Department of Education, pending the resolution of a land claim, in terms of the Restitution of Land Rights Act, over his farm.

The Human Rights Watch Report, too, documents numerous cases in which farmers have obstructed farm children's access to school. For example:

At Cambridge Primary School, in the Free State Province, the Principal, who is also the only teacher at the school, informed Human Rights Watch

researchers that the new owner of the property had repeatedly locked the gate to the school, and that the provincial department of education had not effectively intervened to prevent [this] interference with access.²³

So much for farm school governance. What about funding? Despite significant education funding reform since 1996, state education expenditure has not increased sufficiently to allow farm schools to address the educational deficit created by rural poverty. South Africa's education system suffers from massive inequalities in resource and infrastructure provisioning inherited from apartheid, and farm schools bear the worst of that burden. The national treasury has allocated little extra money to the Department of Education to redress these inequalities. Without the funds necessary to pursue substantive equality in the public education system, the state pursues what it calls an 'equitable' approach to school funding. It allows individual schools to raise funds from parents through compulsory fees, but specifically proscribes fees-based discrimination in law. It targets available state funding for infrastructure and equipment heavily in favour of the schools least likely to be able to raise significant funding from parents. It also makes limited efforts to redistribute teaching posts in favour of these schools.

This privileging of 'equity' over 'equality' has led to a situation in which historically advantaged schools have been able to maintain the quality of education they provide. Historically disadvantaged schools, unable to raise adequate funding from parents, struggle to provide the rudiments of basic schooling with their equitable (but inadequate) share of state funding. To supplement their funds, principals and governors of many poor schools often feel justified in charging fees unlawfully and discriminating against children of parents who do not (and mostly cannot) pay.

There is state assistance for learner transport in richer provinces (such as Gauteng and the Western Cape), but provision of learner transport, especially in rural areas, comes nowhere near matching the need for it. Beyond the provision of child support grants, there is no assistance to households to help them meet other educational costs, including uniforms and food. These costs constitute a heavy burden

²³ Human Rights Watch (note 19 above) 10.

on the poorest households. In rural areas, along with the sheer distance many children must travel to school, these costs often present an insurmountable barrier.²⁴

Like all other poor schools, farm schools have gained little from the state's continued insistence that the burden of education financing must be shared with local communities. Where the community served by a school is wealthy, or where it can rely on a private benefactor²⁵, a school will prosper. Where, as is the case with the vast majority of farm schools, the local community is itself deeply impoverished, farm schools must make do with whatever state allocation they receive.

This raises another problem. State allocations are apportioned according to pupil numbers (which are often in the low tens rather than the hundreds in farm schools, which usually precludes benefits from economies of scale²⁶). But the school allocations, calculated nationally, and often 'top sliced' by provincial departments, are extremely meagre. Assuming most farm schools occupy the bottom fifth of the Department of Education's poverty ranking system (and therefore receive the highest available school allocations) they received between R200 and R450 per learner per year on 2003 figures, depending on their provincial location. This is insufficient, compared with the R600 to R1000 per learner per year the national Department of Education's own research indicates the poorest schools require to provide an adequate standard of education.²⁷ Moreover, most farm schools do not have the legal status necessary to manage their own funds.²⁸ Their budgets, meagre as they are, are managed for them by the relevant provincial department of education, which procures items for a school at the school's request. This system is notoriously bureaucratic, and there have been substantial delays in the past in delivery of basic items such as textbooks and stationery to schools in time for the beginning of each new school

²⁴ For a detailed critique of state education financing policy, see S Wilson 'Taming the Constitution: Rights and Reform in the South African Education System' *South African Journal on Human Rights* 20 (3) 2004.

²⁵ Some farm schools (perhaps the smallest of minorities) undeniably benefit from benevolent farmers.

²⁶ The National Department of Education is currently investigating ways to encourage provincial departments to 'batch' procurement at small schools in order to allow them to benefit from economies of scale.

²⁷ Department of Education *Plan of Action for Improving Access to Free and Quality Basic Education for All* (2003) para 36.

²⁸ Sections 20 and 21 of SASA distinguish between schools which have demonstrated the capacity to manage their own funds and those which have not. Schools with 'Section 21' status, which may be granted at five different levels, corresponding to the financial capacity of the school in question, have the autonomy to spend their own school allocation from the provincial budget, which is transferred, in whole or in part, directly into their bank accounts. Non-'Section 21' schools have their school allocation managed and spent on their behalf by the provincial department of education.

year.²⁹ Some schools in Limpopo visited by the authors went for most of the 2002 school year without receiving these items.

'Top-slicing' and other provincially based budgetary practices also result in significant inter-provincial inequalities in school funding. For example, in 2002, the poorest schools in North West received a school allocation of R60 per learner, whereas the poorest schools in Gauteng and the Northern Cape received an allocation of R450 per learner.³⁰ As we point out in subsequent sections these funding disparities between provinces translate into stark differences in the material conditions in the poorest schools in different provinces. Our research in the Western Cape and Mpumalanga uncovered significant disparities between the two provinces in the levels of resources actually provided to the farm schools we visited.

Monitoring and evaluation of schooling in rural areas across South Africa continues to be weak. Under staffing of Department of Education district offices and the sheer distances which must be travelled to reach remote schools militate against close monitoring of compliance with admission, discipline, funding and language policies in most schools. In our interviews in Mpumalanga most schools reported that no-one from the department of education had visited the school in the past three months. Departmental monitoring in the Western Cape was better. Just over half the respondent principals reported weekly contact with the department and at least monthly visits from department of education officials.

The state and agricultural capital

The relationship between the state and agricultural capital,³¹ already poor by the later apartheid years, has deteriorated even further since 1994. Land redistribution, restitution, and stronger tenure rights for workers (and others) resident on farms, as well as an increase in what rural whites perceive to be politically motivated violent crime, have resulted in heightened sensitivities among many farmers about security of property. The extent to which these sensitivities are justified is a highly controversial issue, but farmer harassment of farm schools may be one manifestation of a broader

²⁹ Department of Education *Report to the Minister: Review of the Financing, Resources of Costs of Education in Public Schools* (2003) 37-42.

³⁰ Department of Education *Plan of Action for Improving Access to Free and Quality Basic Education for All* (2003) para 33.

³¹ By which is meant white agricultural capital.

social struggle to re-assert what farmers believe is a loss of control over land use and service rights. It may also be an attempt to reassert racial and feudal hierarchies in white rural areas.

If this is so, neither the state nor civil society has done much to ameliorate the situation. The effort put into implementing³² land restitution and redistribution programmes (and reassuring farmers about their consequences) is far greater than that expended on securing the continued operation of farm schools. Even the implementation of pro-poor land tenure security statutes, such as the Extension of Security of Tenure Act (ESTA), while sporadic, has been pursued with far more energy than the implementation of s 14 of the SASA.

Only about one-quarter of all agreements envisaged in terms of s 14 of the SASA have been signed, despite a statutory commitment to conclude them within six months of the Act's promulgation. There are no data available on how effectively these agreements have been implemented once signed.

Where efforts have been made to implement s 14, it has been through consultation on pro forma agreements with the agricultural unions. Usually, these agreements require the farmer to allow the farm school land and buildings to be used for education purposes for a nominal fee, or no fee at all, while the state is required to take responsibility for maintenance and service supplies. Alternatively, in most provinces the farmer may opt for a higher (in Mpumalanga, market-related) rent if he is prepared to take responsibility for supplying the school with services and for maintaining its buildings.³³

As noted above, farmer uptake on these agreements has been slow at best. In part, this has been a consequence of many agricultural unions' lukewarm endorsement of the very idea of signing s 14 agreements. The Transvaal Agricultural Union, for example, advises its members to sign agreements which are 'fair and not an additional burden on the owner'.³⁴ This is hardly a ringing endorsement of state-society co-operation. Farmers and their representatives regularly complain about the alleged poor management and governance of many farm schools, the poor quality of education

³² By 'implementation' is meant more than mere enforcement. It also, at minimum, includes education of all the relevant social actors on whose economic and social practices a particular law or policy impacts.

³³ See Human Rights Watch (note 19 above) 30-33.

³⁴ Ibid 33.

they provide, and the state's failure, where it has responsibility to do so, to upgrade schools that are dilapidated.³⁵

The reluctance of many farmers to sign s 14 agreements springs from insecurities relating to land reform generally, and uncertainty about the security of their property. Rationally or not, some see signature of a s 14 agreement as a precursor to expropriation by the back door.³⁶ In some cases, farmers use the existence of a land claim over their property as an excuse not to sign an agreement.³⁷

Our research indicates that the relationship between the state and agricultural capital is not uniformly bad across all the provinces. Relations between the state and farmers appeared relatively good in the Western Cape, and nothing short of appalling in Mpumalanga. One explanation for this may be that state-driven land reform programmes are less likely to impact on commercial farming interests in the Western Cape than on those in Mpumalanga.

The 'new wave' of land dispossession in South Africa

Inevitably, the ongoing land reform process casts a long shadow over farm education. We have already noted the impact of farmers' insecurities about the land reform process on the implementation of s 14 of the SASA. However, the nature and extent of farm dweller evictions is also a major determining factor in the functionality of farm schools and the prospects of farm children in the education system.

Farm dweller evictions are nothing new. The right of the farmer to turn his labourers and their dependants off his land at any time and with little notice was a central feature of the apparatus of social control in rural areas under apartheid. This much was recognised in the inclusion, in the 1996 Constitution, of s 26 (3), which prohibits eviction from one's home without an order of court made after considering all the relevant circumstances. The ESTA is the legislative instrument intended to give effect to this provision in the case of groups of rural farm workers who reside and have, in many cases, done so for a number of generations, on commercial farmland they do not own.

³⁵ Ibid and Interview with farmer in Lichtenberg district of North West Province 14 February 2004.

³⁶ See Human Rights Watch (note 19 above) 34.

³⁷ This is the case with Doreen Bridge Primary School in Limpopo, visited by staff of the Centre for Applied Legal Studies (CALs) in February 2003. See Box 2.

The implementation of the ESTA has been difficult and uneven. There is some evidence to suggest that it has coincided with an increase in the number of evictions from commercial farmlands. Whether this has been primarily the result of the courts' conservative interpretations of the Act, poor implementation of the Act, a decline in agricultural employment or an increase in the frequency of changes in land use and ownership is difficult to tell.³⁸ But there is widespread agreement that the number of 'legal' farm evictions (where an eviction order is obtained from a competent court) is increasing, and that 'legal' farm evictions constitute a small minority (as little as 1%) of the total number of farm evictions in South Africa.³⁹

This has led some authors to speak of a 'new wave' of land dispossession in South Africa.⁴⁰ Indeed, data from a recent survey of farm evictions over the past 20 years shows that almost one million people have been forcibly evicted from farms since 1994, with a further 1.4 million displaced in the search for better housing, livelihoods and social services.⁴¹ Forty-nine per cent of farm evictees are children, which may explain why there has been a decline in the total number of farm schools (4 657 in 1997 compared with 3 550 in 2002⁴² – 2004 figures are currently unavailable). The precise nature of the relationship between this and the number of farm evictions, however, remains uncertain.

We now consider the impact of the historical and contextual factors set out above on present-day farm schools in Mpumalanga and the Western Cape.

IV MPUMALANGA

This section explores a variety of factors impacting on the functionality of and social roles played by farm schools in Mpumalanga. There are 544 public schools located on

³⁸ See M Nefale, S Wilson and J Dugard *Dispute Resolution Practices in Communal and Commercial Tenure Systems* (2004) (unpublished consultants' report for the Department of Land Affairs, on file at CALS; and R Hall 'Farm Tenure' *Evaluating Land and Agrarian Reform in South Africa* (3) Programme for Land and Agrarian Studies 2003.

³⁹ R Hall (note 39 above) 6-8. Nkuzi Development Association and Social Surveys Africa *National Evictions Survey: A Parliamentary Briefing* (2005) mimeo 8.

⁴⁰ T Roux 'Pro-poor Court, Anti-Poor Outcomes: Explaining the Performance of the South African Land Claims Court' (2004) *South African Journal on Human Rights* 20 (4).

⁴¹ Nkuzi Development Association and Social Surveys Africa (note 41 above) 8.

⁴² See Department of Education *School Register of Needs* 1996 and 2000.

private land in Mpumalanga.⁴³ Our research focused on the Malelane district, which, according to the local district office of the Mpumalanga Department of Education, has 24 farm schools. We visited 17 of these schools, as well as 3 further schools in the Eerstehoek district. Malelane is dominated by sugar cane farming, but there are some game farms and citrus, banana and forestry plantations. The Eerstehoek district is dominated by citrus farming.

School management, funding and resourcing

All schools sampled in this research received allocations of between R10 000 and R12 000 per year from the provincial department of education. Many said that they were using these funds to renovate their buildings or construct new classrooms where possible. This gives cause for concern, as school allocations are not intended to be used for making structural improvements. In terms of national funding policy, provincial departments of education are supposed to address infrastructure needs according to provincially determined priority lists.

All the schools we visited had asked the provincial department to attend to their (sometimes dire) needs, but had been told either that it was impossible to make structural improvements to their buildings until a s 14 agreement had been signed in respect of their school, or that the farmer who owned the land on which the school stood was responsible for making their improvements. Poor or non-existent communication between the provincial department and farmers meant that farmers were unlikely to contribute materially to renovation or building projects in the majority of the schools we visited.

Others schools reported that a proportion of their school allocation would go towards transporting educators to principals' meetings, training workshops and other work-related events.

With high levels of poverty in local communities, the extent to which a school can access external funding depends largely on the local farmer's attitude towards it. Very few schools receive material support from the farmer. When they do, the support comes in different forms, such as direct financial contributions, making other

⁴³ The data held by the Mpumalanga Department of Education do not distinguish between farm schools and other categories of public schools located on private land, such as church schools. The vast majority of the 544 schools on private land are, however, likely to be farm schools.

resources (such as fax machines, telephones and transport) available, and, in one case, renovating school buildings.

Relationships with farmers appeared to be better when they are not personalised. The ‘well cared for’ schools we visited were located on farms owned by big corporations such as Transvaal Suiker Beperk (TSB), one of the biggest sugar producing companies in South Africa. As one school principal told us:

TSB has donated some office equipment (including a PC). They also donate R5000 to the school every year. They also renovate the school every year – something that the government should do.⁴⁴

None of the schools we visited derives any significant income from school fees, which range between R20 and R80 per annum. Very few parents pay. Most principals ascribed non-payment of schools fees to the ignorance, rather than the poverty, of parents. Parents are generally characterised as uncomprehending of the value of primary education. However, some principals appear to appreciate the levels of income poverty in farm labouring households:

We have a school fees policy of R50. Most parents cannot afford even this. The average wages of workers in this farm is R400 per month.⁴⁵

Most schools we visited do not have a functioning SGB. What is more, those SGBs which are nominally functional, in the sense that they hold regular meetings, appear never to be involved in the formulation of school policies on discipline, funding, or admissions. Where SGBs exist, they tend to mobilise or directly provide practical assistance for the school, usually in the form of manual labour:

SGB is mainly responsible for the school vegetable garden and kitchen that feed the learners.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Interview April 2005.

⁴⁵ Interview April 2005.

⁴⁶ Interview, principal April 2005.

Physical conditions

All the schools we visited suffered from years of underinvestment. Many date back 30 years and have had the same furniture since they were established. Most schools do not have access to clean water and electricity, which is a frequent source of complaint amongst educators.

In one school, parents, educators and children all reported that the biggest cause of absenteeism is a recurring stomach ailment which afflicts children at the school and is believed to be linked to the school's water supply. Almost all the children in the focus group we conducted in this school are absent more than once a month because of unbearable stomach cramps. They believe that the water they drink – which is unclean – is contaminated by fungi and sometimes contains faeces. This water is also used to cook the food dispensed through the school's feeding scheme. The water is not intended for drinking. It is used to irrigate a citrus crop directly adjacent to the school, but because the school does not have running water, it is dependent on this supply.

Seven schools we visited lacked even basic pit latrines and wash basins. Learners and staff have to go to the toilet in the bush.

Very few schools have proper sports grounds. Soccer grounds of varying quality were relatively common, and used exclusively by boys. Girls, or learners who are not keen soccer players are not offered alternative sport opportunities. Generally speaking, physical education for girls is not, in any case, a priority. In one school, the principal has dismantled the netball hoops at either end of a netball court and used them as cooking pot stands in the school's makeshift kitchen. The soccer goalposts remain intact.

In theory most farm schools in Mpumalanga have a feeding scheme (which is the responsibility of the provincial government) available for their learners, providing meals consisting of pap and soya beans or soya mince. Schools are not expected to pay the supplier out of their annual budgets. In practice, however, school feeding schemes are far from functional. At every school we visited we heard complaints about the way the scheme operated. The food is expected to last one full month but most school principals said the amount of food supplied was never sufficient to meet their learners' needs for more than two weeks each month. Many children come from

extremely poor families and rely on this food as their only meal each day. When the feeding scheme runs out, they have no other sources of food.

We do get a supply of the government feeding scheme. All children are dependent on it. The school has changed into a ‘feeding place’ because most parents send their children to go eat at the school. For some children, the feeding scheme is the only meal they ever get in a day.⁴⁷

Several principals reported that learner attendance drops off after feeding scheme food runs out, and picks up again around the time a new delivery of food is expected.

the only thing I like about the school is feeding scheme.⁴⁸

In most schools senior learners prepare the food. In many cases this preparation includes gathering firewood, making a fire, cooking the food and serving it to the rest of the children, activities that can take anything between one and two hours each day. Some schools employ someone to prepare the food. The payment of this person – usually between R11 and R20 a day – is drawn from school funds. We found that in some instances administrative delays in accessing school funds via the provincial department of education caused significant problems with the feeding scheme:

All children in this school are dependent on the feeding scheme. Sometimes the assistant goes unpaid for months. Because of this, she stops cooking for the children and the teachers have to take turns cooking for the children.⁴⁹

These practices underscored the premium placed on the feeding schemes by both parents and educators. Nutrition in farm workers’ households appears to be so bad that schooling is valued more for its ability to provide food security than for the social opportunity it offers. Educators and principals often spoke as if they were soup-kitchen servers rather than trained professionals with specialised skills. On the one hand, this is encouraging. Schools in farming communities provide an essential

⁴⁷ Interview, principal April 2005.

⁴⁸ Learner Focus Group August 2005.

⁴⁹ Interview, principal April 2005.

service to children by helping to meet their nutritional needs. On the other hand, it can hardly be considered acceptable that some of these schools have been reduced to holding operations in communities with households teetering on the edge of a severe food crisis.

Curriculum delivery

All the teachers we spoke to have been trained in outcomes based education (OBE). Our respondents described OBE as a teaching methodology which carefully links the delivery of knowledge in the classroom to children's acquisition of specific skills. The curriculum and assessment methodologies are organised around these desired outcomes. According to the Department of Education website, 'this new system starts with the belief that all students can learn and succeed. Institutions control the conditions of success through the supply of quality, authentic learning experiences and therefore the students' success is the responsibility of the teacher'.⁵⁰ The core of OBE methodology is an emphasis on the 'discovery' of knowledge through group discussion and independent activity-based learning. It is often contrasted with so-called 'chalk and talk' methodologies, which emphasise a teacher-driven lecturing style and require children to take notes in preparation for formal testing.

Educators in farm schools had mixed feelings about the appropriateness of OBE in the farm school sector. According to one:

Since OBE has been introduced, it has changed schooling in the sense that teachers can now see the IQ of each learner. The problem with the transition is that many parents cannot take time to know what is going on about the education of their children. Because OBE needs us to treat every child as an individual so that we can identify what 'outcomes' they need to achieve, it helps if parents can get involved and talk to us about what they want their kids to achieve. But, with them working 12-hour days, they are too busy on the farms.⁵¹

⁵⁰ www.pitech.ac.za/robert/obe last visited 24 October 2005.

⁵¹ Interview, educator August 2005.

While some educators asserted that OBE encourages them to develop their skills and, if properly implemented, demands more from learners, many lamented that there are resource challenges they feel government has ignored. Most teachers pointed out that the individualised, activity-based approach required by OBE sits uncomfortably with poorly resourced classrooms, lacking teaching aids and stationery. Many educators argued strenuously that poorly resourced classrooms leave little room for anything other than traditional rote learning and ‘chalk and talk’ methods. While many do what they can to encourage group work and activity-based lessons, most admit that they spend most of the time ‘drilling’ learners in knowledge OBE requires they ‘discover’ through group discussion and activity.

These difficulties are compounded in schools dependent on multi-grade teaching. Five of the 20 schools we visited in Mpumalanga are single educator schools. In one of these, which caters for learners across the primary phase, the educator reported switching between subjects ‘15 times a day’.⁵² In these circumstances, the educator complained that she was unable to devote the level of attention required to each child’s development. She also found it impossible to implement OBE methodologies meaningfully. None of the educators we interviewed said that they had been given any training in coping with multi-grade teaching.

School and community

Despite labour legislation aimed at improving the pay and conditions of farm workers, many still live in abject poverty. According to our research, at the lower end, many still earn as little as R400 per month. Many farmers in the Malelane district continue to employ foreign nationals (mostly from Mozambique and Swaziland) as a way of evading minimum wage demands. Evictions from farms⁵³ combine with the increasingly casualised and seasonal nature of farm work to create extremely mobile populations in the region. This has resulted in poor attendance and high drop-out rates in farm schools. Almost all the school principals we interviewed complained that the enrolment rates and learner presence in schools fluctuate every year.

⁵² Interview, single-educator school principal April 2005.

⁵³ According to one of our farm worker respondents, farm evictions are motivated by farmers’ erroneous fears of future land claims.

All the parents we interviewed were farm workers who worked for between nine and thirteen hours a day six or seven days a week. Work at weekends (especially on Sundays) means more pay. Farm workers are usually paid a daily rate of between R15 and R50, depending on their gender, the nature of their work, and the length of time they have been employed on a particular farm. Given these rates of pay and working conditions, and the seasonal nature of much farm work, it is almost impossible for parents to involve themselves in their children's education, either by helping with school work or developing a relationship with their children's educators.

Even where farm labourer populations are relatively stable, the need to earn extra income and the demands of household labour are powerful disincentives to keeping children in school. Girls, who are expected to perform the bulk of household tasks, generally drop out of school before boys, who themselves eventually succumb to the need to earn extra income for the household through farm labour. In the 20 schools we visited no educator knew of any former learners who had gone beyond the first or second year of high school. The bulk of educators reported that the former students they knew of now work on local farms. Most of these former learners, who are now parents, continue to send their children to the same farm school they went to.

Another factor retarding parental involvement in school life is that educators tend to live far away from the school communities. Educators we spoke to live between 50 km and 130 km from the school. Poor or expensive transport links mean that some educators hitchhike to work. Organising parents' meetings at weekends and on public holidays (when many parents are off work) is an undesirable challenge for them. We found that a principal can only organise a weekend or afternoon meeting with parents if he or she lives in teachers' accommodation in the school grounds or owns a car.

Learners' lives

As far as we were able to glean from learner focus groups and diaries, domestic labour and the experience of violence loom large in learners' lives both at home and at school.

As may be expected, school principals and educators firmly deny the use of corporal punishment. By contrast, learners describe getting 'the stick' for many reasons, including coming late to school, not wearing full school uniform, not doing

homework and not keeping hair neat. An analysis of learners' diaries reveals the experience of corporal punishment as a sudden and arbitrary outburst rather than a rule-governed disciplinary response:

Today the teacher beat me for no reason. I was washing my face from the water tank and the teacher saw me and slapped me. It was sore but I kept quiet.⁵⁴

On average, learners walk anything from seven to twelve kilometres each way to get to school. Of the 20 schools we visited, two have government organised and subsidised scholar transport. Many children rely on the goodwill of farmers to load them onto a tractor and transport them to school. If this kind of transport is not available, they walk. According to one principal:

Learners walk to school for about one to two hours. Because of this school has different starting and finishing times during winter and summer.⁵⁵

Sometimes, in bad weather, learners have stay at home. In many schools this is a common reason for poor attendance. An analysis of learners' diaries shows that there are other challenges they face on the road to and from school:

On my way to school I saw a big snake on the side of the road. I was scared to walk pass it ... but I did. I was worried that I would see it when I returned home, but it was gone.⁵⁶

Even those learners lucky enough to have government organised transport have to cope with sporadic service. They are often unsure of what time the bus will arrive. Often it does not come at all. When this happens, learners have to choose whether they should go to school or not. In most instances, they choose to proceed to school and rely on lifts and hitchhiking.

⁵⁴ Learner diary August 2005.

⁵⁵ Interview August 2005.

⁵⁶ Learner Focus Group August 2005.

At home, learners have little time to socialise or play with friends. Most of those we interviewed said that they wake up at 5am to prepare for school, which starts at 8am. Between two and three hours in the morning are spent doing household chores, preparing for school, and travelling to school. In some cases learners have to do all this without the supervision of their parents, who have to leave home for work at around 5am, waking their children as they go. Older children not only have to prepare themselves but also their younger siblings. Time spent walking to school can be anything from five minutes (for learners whose school is located in the farm yard) to two hours. Most learners spend at least an hour and a half walking to school. One reported a trip of up to three hours if he misses the school bus.

Scholar transport does not necessarily mean a short walk. For some learners the nearest bus stop is an hour away. After school, most girl learners spend time doing household chores such as cleaning the house and cooking dinner. Even amongst the boys very few mentioned spending time playing with their peers. Only one mentioned watching television at night.

In the focus group interviews, learners were asked to say what their aspirations were. Most mentioned careers outside the farming environment. Ambitions such as being a doctor, nurse, radio DJ, engineer, teacher, and businessperson, were most common. Even those who wish to be teachers do not see themselves teaching in farm schools.

Also noteworthy is the fact that very few learners wish to spend all their lives on farms. Many want to stay in big cities for a variety of reasons. However, as mentioned above, what we found in the initial interviews with school principals is that a great majority of learners they have taught over the years do not proceed beyond primary education and are likely to end-up being farm workers. Nonetheless, according to learners:

The farm is very limited. We don't see many things . . . like nice cars and soccer stars.

Farms are OK for farming, but are not good for social life.

Farm work is enslaving and pays little money. Farmers are abusive and workers are bitten by snakes all the time.⁵⁷

Schools and farmers

The nature of the relationship between schools and owners of the land on which they stands varies in cases where there is no s 14 agreement in place. A few farmers assist the schools with certain material necessities. The nature of assistance varies and is dependent on the will of the farmer. Some farmers pay for renovations, provide learners with ad hoc transport, pay for school photocopiers and fax machines and provide land for sports and extramural activities.

Other farmers are extremely hostile. Educators report having vehicular access to the school blocked, being threatened with guns, and having the number of children they can admit limited by farmers. On one farm, crop dusters spraying insecticides on fruit trees fly straight over the school with the spray still on. According to the school's principal, this is an effort at constructive eviction:

The farmer says that he wants to close the school down and take over the land. He says he wants to use the school building as his storeroom and breed his chickens.⁵⁸

'Nice cars and soccer stars': policy implementation and social reproduction in Mpumalanga's farm schools

Little is being done in Mpumalanga's farm schools to provide farm children with a route out of rural poverty. Farm schools are essentially holding operations for a rural agricultural labour force, and appear to prepare their children for little more than life either as an agricultural labourer or as a rural/urban migrant in search of the 'nice cars and soccer stars' they believe urban life will bring them. Unfortunately, with few marketable skills and, at most, only two or three years of secondary schooling behind

⁵⁷ Learner Focus Groups August 2005.

⁵⁸ Interview, principal April 2005.

them, it is unlikely that eventual migration to urban areas will afford farm children the opportunities they dream of.

While poor funding, administration and monitoring play their part in the failure of farm schools to break out of their role in the reproduction of rural power relations, our research in the Western Cape revealed that these limitations are overlaid by broader social contextual factors. It is to an examination of the Western Cape, and a deeper exploration of these factors that we now turn in order to explain fully the role of farm schools in the perpetuation of an essentially feudal rural social reality.

V WESTERN CAPE

There are some 363 farm schools in the Western Cape. All of these, according to an official of the Western Cape Department of Education (WCDE),⁵⁹ have functional s 14 agreements in place. In terms of these agreements the farmer is paid a monthly rent by the WCDE in return for having the school on his/her land.

We visited 23 schools in the Western Cape, all of them primary schools. Many were originally established by the NG Kerk (Dutch Reformed Church), with the assistance or consent of the farmer. Nowadays the church plays only a limited, if any, role in the running and funding of the schools. Afrikaans is the medium of instruction in all the farm schools in the area and almost all learners are coloured,⁶⁰ reflecting the farm labour force in the area, which is fairly settled and overwhelmingly coloured.

Funding, resources and infrastructure

While farm schools in the Western Cape are not over-resourced, they are clearly better funded than those in Mpumalanga. Indeed, they are probably the best-funded farm schools in the country. Yet, our research indicates that socio-economic prospects for learners from Western Cape farm schools are not much higher than those for learners in Mpumalanga. This suggests that, although adequate funding is essential, it is not sufficient to promote the broader socio-economic aspirations of farm school learners.

⁵⁹ Telephone interview 2 February 2005.

⁶⁰ We were aware of only a few Xhosa-speaking learners in the 23 schools.

By and large, the schools we visited were sufficiently funded, especially when compared to schools serving similarly placed socio-economic communities in the rest of South Africa. They all had adequate buildings, classrooms and toilet facilities, a functioning water and electricity supply and satisfactory learning support materials. Indeed, some of the schools we visited have personal computers for the use of learners.

Our research in the Western Cape did not identify any learner having to walk further than 5 km to and from school. In the schools we visited, scholar transport is provided for all learners who live beyond a 5 km radius. However, with reports of younger learners spending up to two hours walking to and from school,⁶¹ it remains an open question whether the official benchmark of 5 km is an appropriate cut-off for the provision of scholar transport by the government. It is clear from our research that, for pupils who have to walk up to 5 km, there is a strong temptation to stay at home rather than to go to school, especially when it rains. According to one educator: ‘when it rains we only have half the usual number of learners’.⁶² This suggests that there is a correlation between distance from school and school attendance, although further research is needed to quantify the problem.

Most, although not all, schools in our sample have government-sponsored feeding schemes. The absence of such feeding schemes in some schools is at odds with policy requirements, and points to a lack of monitoring of farm schools by the WCDE which is expanded on below. With proper monitoring, principals would be required to moderate attitudes such as we encountered in one school that does not have a feeding scheme: “the learners are only here for the morning, so I don’t see why we should feed them”.⁶³

Almost all the schools in our sample practised multi-grade teaching, typically with two classes: grades 1 to 3 and 4 to 6. Educators and principals from all the schools where multi-grade teaching takes place expressed serious concern that the system impacts negatively on the educational performance of learners. Further research is necessary to determine the effects of multi-grade teaching on learners’ educational and career prospects, but, in the words of one educator, ‘multi-grade

⁶¹ Interview, principal July 2005.

⁶² Interview July 2005.

⁶³ Interview, principal July 2005.

teaching isn't fair on the learners – they don't get the kind of educational focus they should for their particular grade'.

School governance

The schools we visited were a mixture of 'Section 20' and 'Section 21' schools.⁶⁴ Somewhat surprisingly, the level of financial autonomy exercised by a school seems to have little impact on either its running or its efficiency. Indeed, school principals we spoke to were not at all concerned about financial autonomy. This seems to indicate that, as long as there is sufficient funding, the degree of financial autonomy is irrelevant to the effectiveness of the school.

Moreover, contrary to the high premium placed on the autonomy of school governing bodies in national debates on education policy SGBs seem relatively peripheral to the management and governance of farm schools in the Western Cape. Parent governors (the majority of whom are farm labourers) seldom participate meaningfully in the management and governance of the school. In most cases SGB input is restricted to setting the level of school fees and 'coming to functions where food is provided'.⁶⁵ One parent we interviewed told us that she had heard of the SGB, but that she did not 'know who is on it or what it does'.⁶⁶

However, in our focus groups the children of SGB members were more responsive than the other learners. One reason for this could be the fact that the parents who volunteer for SGB membership, despite the significant pressures of farm life, do so because they are determined to give their children 'a better chance' than they had.⁶⁷

All the schools we visited charge fees ranging from R30 to R250 per year. According to school principals, whatever the fees charged, most parents do not pay. One principal said that learners are not refused access and parents are encouraged to pay 'if and when they can'.⁶⁸ We found this attitude typical of most principals we interviewed. The range, as well as the non-payment of school fees suggests the need for a revision of the school fees policy, which appears to function neither uniformly

⁶⁴ See note 28 above.

⁶⁵ Interview, educator July 2005.

⁶⁶ Interview July 2005.

⁶⁷ Interview, parent governor July 2005.

⁶⁸ Interview, principal July 2005.

nor effectively. Moreover, as currently implemented, the school fees policy places an unrealistic burden on poor and unemployed parents to acquaint themselves with exemption options. Only one of the parents interviewed⁶⁹ was aware of the fees exemption system. None of the principals interviewed had informed parents of the exemptions policy. Evidently, the system of relying either on principals to impart exemptions policy-related information to parents, or on parents to access such information themselves is not working. Further research is needed to determine what percentage of the cost of running farm schools is made up of school fees contributions, but it is unlikely that it is enough to justify the continuation of this unwieldy and burdensome policy in such poor communities.

Corporal punishment remains widespread in farm schools. There appears to be no serious attempt – at either a departmental or a school level – to end the practice. We were alerted to it by a learner in our first focus group who, in response to a question about whether there are any differences between being a girl or a boy at school, responded by saying: ‘girls get hit on the hand and boys get hit on the backside’.⁷⁰ Subsequent responses to the question ‘how are you punished if you do something naughty at school?’ indicate that corporal punishment continues in at least half the schools. Learners are clearly not aware that the practice is illegal and they openly talk and write about it. One learner wrote in his/her diary: ‘the teacher gave each child three cuts today because they were rude’. When challenged with this reality, a WCDE official stated that all principals are aware that corporal punishment is illegal, but she admitted that many principals and educators get away with it because ‘farm schools are underneath the radar’.⁷¹

Governance-related issues such as the ineffectiveness of SGBs, divergent school fees and absence of information about exemptions policies, as well as the disturbing continuation of corporal punishment in schools suggest that to a large extent farm schools do exist ‘underneath the radar’. Together with the problems related to differentiated provincial funding and spending, this raises questions about the decentralisation of the education function to provinces and to SGBs, as well as the efficacy of departmental monitoring and evaluation systems in respect of farm schools.

⁶⁹ A mother who was told about the school fees exemption policy by the Department of Social Welfare because she fostered children.

⁷⁰ Learners Focus Group July 2005.

⁷¹ Interview July 2005.

Farm schools and agricultural life

Farm schools in the Western Cape are deeply embedded in agricultural labour and capital accumulation systems. It is clear from interviews with farmers, educators and principals that, notwithstanding the aspirations of learners themselves, the vast majority of learners from farm schools do not advance beyond primary level education and almost all end up 'back on the farm'.⁷² Indeed, one of the most striking findings of our research is the disjuncture between the expressed aspirations of learners and their seemingly inevitable role in the maintenance of the agricultural system. Our research indicates that farm owners, principals and educators draw a strong link between reproduction of the farm schools and the perpetuation of future farm labour. Accordingly, they do not encourage learners to strive towards other visions.

Lived reality of farm-based school life

When asked in focus groups about their aspirations, only two learners of a total of 40 in five focus groups in the Western Cape expressed a desire to work on a farm, because 'it's nice on a farm'.⁷³ For the others, farm work was not viewed as a desirable prospect because 'you work your arse off on a farm', 'you earn too little' and 'you end up dirty like animals'.⁷⁴ In contrast, cities are viewed positively as places with 'big houses', 'more excitement' and 'lots of jobs'. Learners who do not want to work on farms said they would like to become doctors, police officials, nurses and social workers.

This optimism about future prospects is clearly not shared by educators and principals, almost all of whom expressed scepticism about learners' potential to advance beyond primary school. Indeed, in direct contradiction of the aspirations expressed by learners in our focus groups, one educator told us:

⁷² Interview, principal July 2005.

⁷³ Focus group July 2005.

⁷⁴ Learners in three different focus groups July 2005.

If you ask the learners, they'll say they want to work on the farm or in the kitchen. They don't say they want to be a doctor – they don't have that vision. Only eight have reached matric over the past few years – the vast majority returns to work on the farm.⁷⁵

There are no data on either the drop-out rates of farm school learners or the percentages of former farm school learners who make it through secondary or tertiary education. However, interviews with principals and educators suggest that very few of the learners who leave each year complete secondary education and only about 'one in five years makes it to university'.⁷⁶ According to an educator at one of the few farm schools to teach grade 7, of 37 learners in grade 7, typically about 30 will go to secondary school, but 'most will drop out after the first year' as they are 'only there for the bus ride'.⁷⁷ A principal told us that every year 'only about two learners go to high school', but often 'both don't make it to matric' and no learner from his school has 'ever made it to university'.⁷⁸ Pessimism about learners' capacities and prospects was commonly expressed by educators and principals, with one educator blaming learners' poor performance on 'low IQs' as a result of 'inbreeding' in the (coloured) community, and another referring to his learners as 'lazy' and with a 'lack of commitment to school'.⁷⁹

Educators' cynicism about learners' abilities is reflected in their attitude to OBE, which the majority of educators felt was 'too advanced' for farm school learners, whose 'world is too small'.⁸⁰ One educator expressed her views as follows:

Learners don't have the background and support materials at home to really benefit from the system. They should rather be taught the basics – to read, write and do maths. The expectations are too high because they are not going further than the farm – they don't have the opportunity. For example,

⁷⁵ Interview July 2005.

⁷⁶ Interview, educator July 2005.

⁷⁷ Interview July 2005.

⁷⁸ Interview July 2005.

⁷⁹ Interviews with educators at two different farm schools July 2005. In an astonishing display of racial stereotyping, the second educator (although coloured himself), was at pains to point out that he much preferred the few Xhosa-speaking learners he has had in his school over the years because they are 'academically far better than so-called coloured learners'; they are 'more disciplined', their 'parents drive big cars' and are 'nurses or other professionals'.

⁸⁰ Interviews with two educators at two different farm schools July 2005.

they don't know what a 'slip-and-slide' is and many don't even have a TV.⁸¹

In another educator's opinion of OBE in the farm school context:

They can't really do maths, so they won't become entrepreneurs. What is it to tell them about a theatre? They'll only go maybe once in a lifetime, so it would be more important to tell them how to behave than to use special words like ballet, curtain etc.⁸²

It is striking that, in the context of the surprisingly negative attitude towards learners expressed by all but one of the educators we interviewed, none assumed any responsibility for bettering learners' opportunities. Although we do not have direct evidence of a lower standard/quality of education offered in farm schools than in other South African schools, it seems logical that such a negative and defeatist attitude on the part of educators must impinge on the prospects of learners, feeding into a negative cycle of dependence on the farm system and an inability to break away to achieve higher education and opportunity.

Lived reality of farm-based home life

As disparaging as educators were of learners, their strongest criticism was levelled at parents, who 'don't even ask bother to ask how their children's day was', who show 'a lack of commitment to their children's education' and whose involvement in school life is 'on the extremely low side'.⁸³ In the words of the most positive educator we interviewed:

The biggest problem facing the learners is their home lives, which isn't very stable. There is a lot of alcohol and drug abuse. At 'news time' on Monday mornings, the learners tell me how their parents drink and fight at

⁸¹ Interview July 2005. It is, by the way, unclear to us what knowing what a 'slip-and-slide' is or owning a TV have to do with educational performance and outcomes.

⁸² Interview July 2005.

⁸³ Interviews with two educators at two different farm schools July 2005.

weekends. I try to instil discipline and pride in the learners but it gets undone every night at home.⁸⁴

On the subject of sexual abuse, one principal told us that girl learners ‘grow up with sexual harassment’ and ‘some drop out of primary school due to pregnancy’.⁸⁵ An educator at another school told us that it is not uncommon for primary school girl learners to engage in sex with family members for ‘R2 or R5’ and that often the learners are defensive, explaining: ‘no-one else loves me’.⁸⁶

Obviously such reports cannot be objectively reviewed, but some substantiation of the difficulty of farm-based home life was provided in focus group discussions with learners. One learner told us that he had worked for the farmer during the recent holidays because ‘it’s not nice at home’.⁸⁷ When asked why he wanted to be a police officer, one learner explained that this was so he could ‘catch people who don’t look after their children’.⁸⁸ In another focus group a learner told us he wanted to be a lawyer ‘to help people on farms with drinking and drugging problems’.⁸⁹ Entries in diaries bore out problems at home. One learner wrote the following in her/his diary: ‘I did not want to go to [x] so my mother hit me on the head and called me a big puss’.⁹⁰ Another learner expressed being ‘very angry’ at being forced to stay out of school to look after a baby sister and to clean the house.⁹¹ One learner’s diary contained a ‘list of things I want for the future’, listing: ‘no children’, ‘a polite wife’ and ‘to help my mother and father with money problems’.⁹²

Discussion about home life in focus groups indicated that at least a third of learners come from single- or no- parent families, many living with their mothers only or their grandparents, and with two in a boys’ home (one of whose mother placed him there because ‘she had too many children to care for’). There is also a significant reliance on social security grants, including child support grants, disability grants and

⁸⁴ Interview July 2005.

⁸⁵ Interview July 2005.

⁸⁶ Interview July 2005.

⁸⁷ Learner Focus Group July 2005.

⁸⁸ Learner Focus Group July 2005.

⁸⁹ Learner Focus Group July 2005.

⁹⁰ Entry in learner’s diary July 2005.

⁹¹ Entry in learner’s diary July 2005.

⁹² Entry in learner’s diary July 2005.

pensions. One parent explained that such grants help to maintain families living on farms in off-season periods when some farmers do not pay wages.⁹³

It is important to locate any critique of farm-based home life, and indeed of farm-based school life too, in the context of an enmeshed, almost feudal, farm labour system. Typically in this area of the Western Cape dominated by wine and wheat farms families have lived on the farms for generations, comprising closed communities with few outsiders and with scant reference to other ways of life. Added to this is the legacy of an apartheid 'dop' system (provision of alcohol in lieu of or to supplement wages), evinced in the high incidence of alcoholism in parents and the existence of foetal alcohol syndrome (FAS) in learners. Although the extent of the FAS problem is disputed by some within the WCDE, NGO organisations such as DopStop, as well as educators, are convinced the problem is widespread and that, at least partially, FAS accounts for the low academic performance of farm school learners.⁹⁴

The insular and static nature of this poorly paid, but relatively secure, lifestyle militates against alternative modes of life, and contributes to cycles of perpetuation and reproduction of farm labour. The result is a kind of feudal patronage in which the farmer provides housing, electricity and water, as well as employment to family members through the generations, instead of a professional, adequately paid, contractual relationship. Learners at farm schools, living and learning on the farm as they do, are sucked into the vortex.

Farming communities in the Western Cape are therefore not exactly the coercive 'total' institutions Nasson describes. Rather they are patterned, self-reproducing social entities which depend on the active consent and participation of farm workers. To some extent, farm workers choose their social role despite their (admittedly very limited) exposure to alternative ways of life. This does not mean that farm workers in the Western Cape happily accept their subjection despite the existence of better options, rather it suggests that the options open to them are less materially secure, if concomitantly less socially oppressive.

⁹³ Interview July 2005.

⁹⁴ Interviews with DopStop Fieldworker March 2005. Interviews with educators between March and August 2005.

Farm schools and farmers

In contrast to the negative attitude of educators and principals, all the farmers we interviewed are positive about the existence of farm schools on their properties. In the main, this relates to the fact that farm school learners are a source of immediate as well as long-term labour. In the short term each of the farmers interviewed admitted to employing learners during the holidays to do work such as cleaning cars, sweeping leaves and fixing fences. Apparently not consciously coerced, learners appear not to mind doing such work and many spoke happily about earning sums such as ‘R30 for the day’ from farm work. In the view of farmers, the learners actively seek work because ‘they are bored’ and ‘they want to earn pocket money’.⁹⁵ Each farmer was aware that employing children under the age of 16 is illegal, but, in the words of one:

We understand why it is illegal to employ children on the farm, but it’s a pity because you must teach them how to work. We have a boy on the farm whose father begged us to employ his son, but we couldn’t pay him because he was younger than 16 so we just gave him lunch in return for work and now, at the age of 17, he’s almost a boss-boy.⁹⁶

In the long term, farmers are aware that it is increasingly difficult to attract labour to farms and that farm schools are a ready source of semi-literate labour that is firmly entrenched in the farm way of life. In the words of one farmer:

I will support the school as long as I can. Educated workers make better workers because of the high-tech nature of modern-day farming. With the multiple decisions required of workers, I don’t want them running to me with questions all the time.⁹⁷

⁹⁵ Interviews with two farmers July 2005.

⁹⁶ Interview July 2005.

⁹⁷ Interview July 2005.

A farmer who had built a farm school between 1965 and 1967, ‘back in the days when education wasn’t compulsory’, told us that he had ‘always felt that labour should be educated because you can’t work with people who can’t read and write’.⁹⁸

Comments such as these, made it clear to us that farmers in the Western Cape view farm schools exclusively as a continual source of farm labourers educated to a level sufficient to perform the tasks required of them on the farm. As a consequence, the relationships between farmers and farm schools/learners in the Western Cape are relatively good. It is also clear that, as with any personality-based system of patronage, the precise contours of the relationship with the farmer are a big factor in determining the benefits reaped by farm school learners. We were told about a farmer who had set up a trust fund to enable each of his labourers’ children to go to university. Conversely, a parent told us that ‘her’ farmer (who we did not interview) refuses to allow learners to use the school’s sports field and hits learners when they draw on the walls of the (scruffy, unpainted) houses the labourers live in.

With so much depending on the farmer’s largesse, it is unclear how the situation can improve until farm labour conditions are upgraded. Similarly, the degree of entrenchment in the reproduction of agricultural capital suggests that, until farm schools are removed from the physical environs of the farm, learners will continue to be viewed by farmers, principals, educators, and, perhaps, by their parents too, as nothing more than a source of ready labour.

The biggest problems encountered in Western Cape farm schools are not primarily related to resources but rather to issues of governance and socio-economic context. In fact, our research reveals only two substantial resource-related problems. The first is that the fact that the vast majority of farm school learners are taught in multi-grade classes impacts negatively on the quality of education and the focus of educators. The second is that some learners have to walk up to 5 km to school, contributing to a significant rate of absenteeism, especially when it rains. A less widespread issue is the failure of some schools to provide feeding schemes, despite an explicit government policy commitment to do so. However, clearly the greatest stumbling block to the educational advancement of farm school learners lies in the entrenchment of farm schools in the fabric of systems of agricultural labour and capital reproduction.

⁹⁸ Interview July 2005.

VI CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Farm schools continue to serve the needs of agricultural capital in providing a semi-educated supply of cheap labour. They continue to fail their learners, who aspire to social mobility and broadened access to economic opportunity. Against the background of the persistent under funding of historically disadvantaged schools and the ongoing paralysis in the administration, monitoring and evaluation of public education in most rural areas, this conclusion should come as little surprise. More interesting, however, is the explanation this report posits for the continued underperformance of farm schools. For, we found, even where funding approaches adequacy and administrative systems are functional, farm school learners can expect no more social mobility and no better access to economic opportunity post-school than their counterparts in badly funded and poorly administered school systems.

Most farm schools in the Western Cape are (relatively) well funded and managed, and relationships between landowners and schools were (relatively) good. By contrast, with a few exceptions, most farm schools in Mpumalanga are poorly funded and badly managed, with precarious or downright hostile relationships between landowners and schools. In neither province, however, can farm school learners expect to access significantly better jobs or earn significantly more money than their parents. Only rarely are learners in either province expected to go on to secondary or tertiary education.

What is common to learners in both sets of schools, however, is their deep embeddedness in the social and economic structures of agricultural production, the low expectations their educators have of them, the low levels of motivation and job satisfaction displayed by educators in most schools, the inability of their parents to contribute financially to their schooling and the economic and social roles they are expected to perform in farm-based households.

These broader social contextual factors seem to explain more about the ongoing inability of farm-based education to meet the needs and aspirations of farm children than do disparities in funding and the quality of governance. While funding and governance are important, just as, if not more, important is the need to place education for farm children beyond the influences of farm life and for the state to

incentivise farm workers more actively to ensure their children's ongoing attendance at school.

What can be done to achieve this? In outline, policy-makers could consider the following interventions:

- The wholesale relocation of farm schools off farm land and on to state-owned land – even where the schools are functioning in terms of land tenure agreements. Farm schools, where possible, should be consolidated into larger, better funded rural education centres which will be able to draw on a broad range of teaching talent and benefit from better resourcing and economies of scale. Adequate transport services should be provided to these schools.
- Where farm labourer populations are seasonal and farms are widely dispersed, serious consideration must be given to establishing larger rural boarding schools. However, appropriate child protection measures must accompany implementation of this option.
- School fees for farm schools should be abolished. School governing bodies should not be expected to fundraise.
- Provincial departments of education should take a more active role in farm school management and governance.
- The state should make more of an effort to ensure that farm labourer households can access child support grants (for children under 14). This could be done by requiring parents to apply for a child support grant when registering their children in a farm school. This would give farm labourers an incentive to enrol their children in school.

These recommendations, if properly implemented, could solve two sets of problems.

First, they would take the 'farm' out of farm education. It is simply not acceptable that farm education continues to play handmaiden to the needs of rural agricultural capital, especially at a time when agricultural labour requirements are in

long-term decline, farm labour is becoming increasingly casualised, and pay and conditions for farm labourers remain poor.

Second, they would consolidate many scattered and tiny farm schools into larger, better resourced and (given the provision of adequate transport) easier to access rural education facilities, which would be able to draw on a deeper pool of teaching talent, and would probably enhance educator morale by concentrating teaching posts at more central locations.

Rural education policy, if it is to break the feudal mode cast by apartheid, must move in an entirely new direction. It needs to use the education of farm children as a way of transforming rural power relations and broadening social opportunities in farm labouring households.

Current practices and policies tend to entrench apartheid rural power relations by making the provision of education dependent on the consent of the farmer and by preparing farm children to do little more than join an ever expanding rural proletariat competing for a static or declining pool of labouring opportunities.



Getting to School in the Northern Cape, 2005. Every summer, when the river floods, these learners use a self-built raft to traverse it during their long walk to school. Photograph: Jurgen Schadeberg