

# Manifestations of ‘capabilities poverty’ with learners attending informal settlement schools

Rouaan Maarman

rmaarman@uwc.ac.za

*In this study I use the notion of ‘capabilities poverty’, as theorised by Sen, to examine the experiences of learners attending informal settlement schools in North-West Province, South Africa. Sen distinguishes between functionings (what people do or their ability to do something) and capabilities (various combinations of what people do, their notions of freedom, what life opportunities they may have). The study was based on a sample of respondents from four schools in the Sarafina informal settlement in Ikageng township in the municipal district of Tlokwe (Potchefstroom). It captured some complexities of schooling within South Africa’s democratic educational framework and clearly exposed the manifestations of capabilities poverty. The precise location of capabilities poverty within the plethora of poverty approaches presents educational research with a reality check when looking at informal settlement schools. The study revealed a multiplicity of barriers for informal settlement learners that prevent them from choosing the educational experience they value and contributes to research into the nuanced nature of the interface between poverty and schooling.*

**Keywords:** capabilities poverty; informal settlement schools; poverty; schooling; schools

## Introduction

The introduction of no-fee schools in South Africa (Harrison, 2006) and the commissioning of an investigation into drop-outs in 2006 have once again sparked debate about poverty in South African education and shown up how poverty and schooling intersect in the South African education system. In the dynamic social realm of the poor, conditions of schooling warrant a discursive elucidation of what poverty means for the poor learner in South Africa. This would help us move beyond the understanding of poverty and schooling in particular contexts, which somewhat redeems the South African education policies, and beyond the ‘symbolism of policy position’, which is regarded by Jansen (2001) as the phase marked by symbolic changes in the new South African education system.

Certain social developments justified this study of informal settlement schools. The latest statistics (StatsSA, 2007a) show an increase in the percentage of people living in informal dwellings since 2001: 14.1% of South African households are informal and, moreover, 53% of South African schools are categorised as Quintile 1 schools (those regarded as the poorest by the provincial education departments). Zhang (2006) makes a connection between schooling and socio-economic status, emphasising that in poor countries what school a learner attends makes a bigger difference to how much he or she learns than would be the case in a rich country. In this article I look for

the under-explored poverty imperatives, the real-life challenges, that should inform education policies in South Africa's informal settlement schools.

Poverty in South Africa has changed in nature and dimension since the advent of democracy in 1994 (Terreblanche, 2004). In 1991, the per capita income was dominated by the racial factor. For example, white per capita income was estimated at R20 600 and black at R2 919 (Price, 1991). In 1994 the poverty statistics showed that 52.8% of South Africans survived on less than R301.1 per month and a further 28.8% on less than R177.6 per month (StatsSA, 2007b). Given these poverty data figures, the new democratic government must have had a clear idea of people's income levels and thus what needed to be done to limit the negative impact of poverty on education. Central to the income question is the capabilities approach theorised by Sen (1980), which acknowledges that differently constructed and situated people require different goods and opportunities to satisfy the same needs. Key principles of systemic transformation such as redress, equity, democracy and access (ANC, 1995:4-5) have directed education policy to account for unequal educational opportunities in South Africa.

However, various poverty imperatives that have developed since the dawn of democracy have challenged the pro-poor education policies twelve years into the new dispensation. The changing face of poverty (Frye, 2005) and the movement of education policy out of the symbolic phase (Jansen, 2001) should be seen as urgent imperatives that justify including capabilities poverty analysis in the democratic education policy framework. The policy struggle should be enhanced to account for the realities of the poor in schooling, and to urge the theorising of poverty and policy, with informal settlements as a backdrop to the South African education system. This therefore was the motivation for this study — to investigate what freedoms learners in informal settlement schools enjoy that would enable them to choose the kind of life they value.

### **Research aims**

My purpose is, first, to locate capabilities poverty amongst the various categories of poverty, so as to increase the value of a capabilities approach for informal settlement schools and, second, to evaluate the manifestation of capabilities poverty among learners attending informal settlement schools in North-West Province, South Africa.

### **Literature review**

Exploring poverty should give us data about the authentic realities of a particular group of people, in this case learners attending informal settlement schools, and about the related phenomena that constitute the poverty realities of schooling. One such phenomenon is the democratic dispensation that provides a framework for schooling. This is an under-explored territory when it comes to translating the democratic dispensation into benefits for informal settlement schooling. Democracy involves constitutive principles such as par-

icipation, community engagement, rationality, consensus, equality and freedom (Adams & Waghid, 2005) and these need to be made realities for learners in informal settlements. In order to track development and bring about changes, the impact of poverty on education should be explained as often as possible and in as many spheres as possible. Kamper makes this notion clear in his 1998 monograph, which is based on the premise that the nature, causes and impact of poverty are misunderstood and related to a lack of accountable strategic determination in terms of social circumstances and needs, including those in the educational arena. In this article I debate the factors Kamper alludes to (1998:3), the nature, causes and impact of poverty, in order to justify using capabilities poverty analysis to examine informal settlement schooling.

### Poverty

Pillay (2004:5) postulates that Bronfenbrenner's ecological model (1979), which explores different systems within a social context, gave rise to an ecosystemic theory suitable for analysing the experiences of learners from informal settlements as multifaceted manifestations of poverty emerged in South Africa since 1994 (Terreblanche, 2004). I therefore take ecosystemic theory as the starting point for analysing poverty in education. Various definitions of poverty over time have directed government's efforts to create a better life for all. However these definitions should account for the changing face of poverty in different contexts, for example, in informal settlements. To show how poverty is contested, in his investigation into the causes of poverty from a South African perspective, Kamper uses insights from the sociological literature that reveal economic, political, structural, anthropological, biological, sociological and religious themes (Alcock, 1993:10-33; Ligthelm, 1993:70).

Similarly, Akinboade and Lalthapersad-Pillay (2004:196-200) locate the causes of poverty mainly in socio-structural trends and the social exclusion characteristic of South African society. To support this they cite problems related to employment, access to land, access to capital and financial services, women's access to the labour market, HIV/AIDS, gender differences, gender participation and representivity, cultural practices, urbanisation, civil conflict and wars. The difference between these two similar viewpoints indicates the very nature of poverty analysis: a particular method (or understanding) must be applied for a particular purpose. This is one undoubted *raison d'être* for including poverty analysis in educational research. It also emphasises that various definitions of poverty exist for various purposes, depending on the objective of the analysis, the nature of the data and the method employed in measuring poverty (Booyesen, 2002:53).

There is no uniform way of defining poverty, but some commonalities can be highlighted (Haswell, 1975:70-72; Sen, 1992:289; McCarthy, 1997; Lok-Dessallien, 2002:2). First, the Copenhagen Declaration (1995) lists deprivation of human needs (food, safe drinking water, sanitation facilities, health, shelter, education and information) as the point of departure when poverty is

discussed. A second common feature of poverty is the lack of entitlement, power, control and opportunities. Poor people to varying degrees lack these basic requirements for maintaining themselves to their satisfaction in most societal spaces and thus experience feelings of hopelessness and meaninglessness (Spies, 2004). A third common feature is the exclusion of the poor through existing social structures, which limits their potential to participate in and influence civil society (Sayed, 2003).

### Capabilities poverty

Frye's summary of alternative approaches (2005), designed specifically for the South African discourse, is a logically acceptable description of poverty. She defines these approaches as follows: *absolute poverty* — a quantitative measure, to distinguish the poor from the non-poor; *relative poverty* — inequality in terms of the distribution of resources in a society; *capabilities poverty* — a lack of the resources people need in order to do or to be 'things of value'; *subjective definitions of poverty* — participatory assessments whereby poor people themselves define poverty; and *social exclusion* — covering both the 'static condition' of poverty and the dynamic process of exclusion that leads to poverty.

The following is an overview of this concept, as a background to this study of capabilities poverty in South African informal settlement schools. Nussbaum and Sen (1993) use a case study to create a point of departure for the capabilities poverty discourse, linking it with Bronfenbrenner's ecosystemic theory (1979). They contend that to understand the true nature of poverty one needs to look beyond the amount of money or goods available for a person, to every aspect of a person's life. Rawls (1971) interrogates the utilitarian approach of development of the time. He offers a critique of its aggregative nature, and then presents a tailor-made approach to understanding poverty for a particular people. Rawls's landmark contribution acknowledges that 'citizens do not arise from positions of social, economic and political equality' (Sayed, 2003). Inequalities could therefore not be lumped together.

The pioneer of capabilities poverty, economist and philosopher Amartya Sen, advanced beyond Rawls's (1971) approach, by suggesting a move beyond the state of opportunity and goods (welfare) to what he called 'functionings'. Sen (1980) therefore recognises that:

- differently constructed and situated people require different amounts of primary goods to satisfy the same needs, and
- it seems reasonable to move away from a focus on goods as such to what goods do to human beings, to the mental reaction or attitude a person derives from such goods.

Sen (1980) distinguishes between functionings (what people do or their ability to do something) and capabilities (various combinations of what people do, their notions of freedom, and what real opportunities they have regarding the life they may lead).

The 'capability approach' is a normative framework for the evaluation of

individual well-being and social arrangements, the design of policies and proposals about social change in society (Robeyns, 2003:5). Its core characteristics are its focus on what people are effectively able to do and to be. This approach, which owes its present form to Sen, 'is concerned with evaluating a person in terms of his or her actual ability to achieve various functionings as part of living and takes the set of individual capabilities as constituting an indispensable and central part of the relevant informational base of such evaluation' (Nussbaum & Sen, 1993:30). It can thus be argued that well-being and development can be seen in terms of a person's capability to function. According to Robeyns (2003:6) 'capability to function' means having the effective opportunities to undertake actions, including the activities a person wants to engage in, and to be the kind of person they want to be.

The major constituents of the capability approach are functionings and capabilities. Sen (1987:36) sees functionings as achievements and capability as the ability to achieve. It therefore appears that functionings are a person's 'beings and doings', whereas capabilities are the various combinations of functionings that a person can achieve. Capabilities are notions of freedom that relate to a person's opportunities to lead a particular kind of life, whereas functionings are more directly related to living conditions. According to Sen (1992:40), capabilities constitute a person's freedom, that is, a person's real opportunities to achieve well-being. He describes education as a basic capability, part of centrally important being and doings that are crucial for well-being (1992). Hoffman also takes this view, seeing access to education and the promotion of a concrete set of basic learning outcomes as foundational to other capabilities (2006:2).

Education should thus enhance capability, taking into account the inter-relatedness of teaching, learning and human development. The educational context and processes must be of a quality to lead to specific learning outcomes in the form of capabilities (Hoffman, 2006:2). Education should thus help a person develop the ability to think critically and creatively, solve problems, make informed decisions, cope with and manage new situations, and communicate effectively. Communities should therefore be afforded opportunities to attend a school and receive education to develop their abilities, and various other educational opportunities should also be available. Since functionings are linked to living conditions and capabilities to opportunities, people will also differ in this regard.

According to Sen, poverty is a complex, multifaceted concept that requires a clear analysis in all of its many dimensions, since all human beings have their own personal characteristics and circumstances. He states that the identification of poverty is an acknowledgement of deprivation viewed as a primarily descriptive form, and argues that it is important to diagnose deprivation, determine what should be done if means are available, and only make actual policy choices in line with the means available (1992:107). Osmani says poverty can be identified with a failure to achieve capabilities, such as to be freed from hunger, and a failure to take part in community life (2005:207). These statements can thus be linked to the capability approach, which

argues that well-being is best understood in terms of capabilities. The poor generally lack a number of things: education, access to land, health and longevity, justice, family and community support, credit and other productive resources, a voice in institutions and access to opportunities, among other things (Quesada, 2001:1).

The capability approach is thus concerned to be absolute in the space of capabilities such as education, nutrition and human dignity, but relative in the space of the commodities, resources and income that are required to realise those capabilities. Since poverty is seen as the deprivation of some minimum fulfilment of elementary capabilities, it becomes easier to understand why poverty has both an absolute and a relative aspect. Robeyns states that the capability approach evaluates policies according to their impact on people's capabilities (2003:6). This includes whether people have access to high quality education, to real political participation and to community activities that help them cope with struggles in daily life. The capability approach can thus be seen as comprehensive and integrative since it links material, mental, spiritual and social well-being.

This approach has been applied in various works on social exclusion by authors, such as De Haan (2000), McCarthy (1997), Slee (2001) and Soudien (1998), who insist on the differentiated nature of investigations into social phenomena such as capabilities poverty. Haswell's discussion of the nature of poverty (1975) suggests the prominence of the link between nature and man and the actions of man, and defines poverty as the point where there is such an imbalance between man and nature that man is unable to rely on nature for his survival or where man cannot claim privilege (survival) in the form of status and political power.

The South African colonial and apartheid past is a classic example of the manifestation of Sen's (1980) and Haswell's (1975) definitions of poverty, since on the most basic level of understanding these definitions encapsulate what happened to the black majority. These definitions also encapsulate the poverty experienced by people living in informal settlements today. To link capabilities poverty to the South African context, one can note Du Toit's (2004) argument that the South African business world 'reduced poor people to a dependent state in complex and unequal relationships of patronage, clientelism and exploitation, and robbed them of many of the resources and capabilities that they needed to be able to claim the rights of entitlements that were theoretically afforded to them in the democratic society'. Du Toit (2004) and Osmani (2005) emphasise the denial of human and political rights as a central theme in understanding capabilities poverty. In Osmani's view (2005), the unidimensional approach of poverty as low income should be replaced with the multidimensional view that poverty consists in the failure to achieve a range of basic capabilities.

For the purposes of this investigation it is important to note some preconditions Sen postulates for poverty analysis from a capabilities approach (Nussbaum & Sen, 1993). Since learners in informal settlements endure

unique conditions, policy makers should recognise and explore the inadequacy of income analysis. Although it serves a diagnostic and identification purpose, it does not account for the nature of poverty and its particular manifestations in particular contexts. In less developed countries, poverty-line analysis is often explicitly derived with reference to nutritional norms, which also have limited value for understanding the nature of poverty. Sen (Nussbaum & Sen, 1993) therefore pleads for a recognition of interpersonal and intersocial variations in the relation between income and capabilities. This kind of analysis needs to be adapted in order to understand the nature of poverty in, for example, informal settlements.

Sen promotes the capabilities approach to poverty analysis by explaining that we need to focus on the freedoms people actually enjoy that allow them to choose the lives they have reason to value (Nussbaum & Sen, 1993). This pursuit of real freedom is evident in the poor South African communities where people have 'abstract freedom' (Adams & Waghid, 2005) as they are unable to choose the lives they want and value.

There is a plethora of issues to discuss in exploring informal settlement schooling in South Africa. Such schooling is characterised by, *inter alia*, low income, a lack of pre-school opportunities, the impact of the HIV&AIDS pandemic, socio-legal aspects of farming and mining which keep people caught up in a cycle of poverty, the distance between home and the workplace, inadequate parental contact and an inability to access child grants (Maarman, 2006). The increase in informal settlements — from 12.7% in 2002 to 14.5% in 2006 of the people living in houses in South Africa (StatsSA, 2007a) — accentuates the need to analyse poverty in informal settlement schools using the capabilities approach. Prinsloo (2004) postulates that schooling in poverty-stricken communities in South Africa is hampered by a lack of services, unsafe environments, lack of order in community structures, vandalism, negative peer group influences, and an unstimulating environment that gives learners a negative academic self-concept, lowers their level of motivation and accumulates academic backlogs. However, Prinsloo misses the root causes of these conditions, which illustrates how easily one can fall into the trap of not considering Sen's plea for recognising interpersonal and intersocial variations of communities when researching poverty. The idea that school governing bodies in informal settlements have only 'abstract freedom', which hampers the governing of poor schools (Adams & Waghid, 2005), helps explain why this schooling environment cannot enable learners to achieve real freedom.

The Gini coefficient (representing the extent of skewed income) increased in South Africa from 0.55 in 2004 to 0.65 in 2006 (Van Aardt, 2007). This illustrates the increasing gap between rich and poor, which permeates through educational experiences. The above issues are just a few to consider in portraying the multi-level nature of poverty in this country's informal settlements. It is safe to assume that most people living in these settlements are chronically poor, since there is evidence of minimal access to productive assets and low capabilities in terms of health, education and social capital (Grant, Hulme, Moore & Shepherd, 2005). The fact that there are schools

operating in these extremely poor areas makes them suitable for research into the effect of capabilities poverty on education.

### **Methodology**

To address the research aims of this study, a phenomenological study (see Leedy & Ormrod, 2005) was undertaken in the Sarafina informal settlement of the city of Tlokwe (Potchefstroom). A literature study was undertaken to locate 'capabilities poverty' (see Frye, 2003) among the different types of poverty. Subsequently, a qualitative research method was applied during August and September 2007 to carry out an in-depth investigation into the complexities of the lives of learners attending informal settlement schools. Three primary schools and one secondary school were identified as the sites of research.

The schools are situated within and adjacent to the Sarafina informal settlement in the southernmost part of the city and are the only schools in direct proximity to one-stand informal dwellings in the township of Ikageng. Two of these schools are newly built, owing to the expansion of the informal settlement over the past ten years. The schools are referred to here as School A (geographically the southernmost school in Ikageng township and completely surrounded by informal dwellings for a radius of at least four kilometres), School B (the second most southern school in Ikageng and surrounded by a mix of informal and formal dwellings), School C (a new secondary school also surrounded by a mix of informal and formal dwellings), and School D (a newly-built primary school on a previously pre-fabricated building site also surrounded by a mix of informal and formal dwellings). Educators from the schools' management teams (the principal, deputy principal and two heads of department) and five representatives of each school from among the Grade 7 learners, and in the case of School C the Grade 8 learners, were chosen as respondents for the investigation.

The four schools are regarded as sites for analysis by the researcher and present particular opportunities to gauge the social arrangements learners in this informal settlement experience from a capabilities approach. The educators on the management teams are closely involved with the poverty issues of the learners and the community and are therefore regarded as insightful respondents (Creswell, 1998). Grades 7 and 8 learners have some experience of primary school and are articulate enough to express their views of the poverty they have experienced in their years at school. A total of 13 educators and 20 learners were available and participated as respondents in the investigation. Four semi-structured focus group interviews (twice each with educators and learners) were conducted to discover what forms capabilities poverty takes among learners in informal settlement schools.

The questions for the educators focused on the issues schools have to deal with in a poverty-stricken school environment and on the learners' experiences of interpersonal and intersocial variations (Nussbaum & Sen, 1993) in the school communities. The questions for learners focused on identifying and understanding capabilities poverty from their perspectives and experien-



ces. Educators were asked to prepare for the focus group discussions by reviewing relevant documents from their respective schools that could give an understanding of the poverty learners experience. The role of the researcher was to ask the open-ended questions (Kvale, 1996), facilitate the discussions, probe for relevance in the discussions and ask questions for clarity. The following questions framed the interviews:

- How did this township/informal settlement develop over the years?
- How would you describe the stability of schooling of learners attending informal settlement schools in this township?
- What does a typical day look like in the lives of these learners?
- What is the economic background of the learners' parents in the township?
- How do learners experience the impact of resources provided by the Department of Education?

Each respondent was positioned as a unique informant with a unique perspective. The interview data were captured via audio recordings, transcribed and then analysed so as to obtain a comprehensive picture of the learners' experiences. To increase the validity and reliability of the data, the transcriptions were coded to present a true reflection of reality. To attend to all ethical considerations, permission was obtained from the local regional office of the Department of Education (Southern Region, North-West Province), the principals of the schools, the learners' parents, and the educators involved. All the educators volunteered their identities for this article as reflected in the next section.

### **Manifestation of capabilities poverty in informal settlement schools**

In this section I seek to explain why learners, who participated in the study, find it difficult to convert their capabilities into functionings. It also explains how the different fundamentals of the capabilities approach manifest in the case of learners in informal settlement schools. One can gauge from this how much freedom these learners have to choose the type of life (schooling) they value.

All the learners from the four schools walk to school, which illustrates their inability to pay in any way for transport to school. More significant is the fact that all the learners who were interviewed had changed schools during their primary school years. From the four schools, 40% of the Grade 7 learners had changed schools twice and a further 20% had changed schools more than three times. This illustrates the instability they experience in their primary school years, an instability that is directly linked to their parents' unstable working conditions (A Loati, B Phakedi, 2007:pers. comm.).

Some of their parents work on farms in the area, some in the suburbs of Tlokwe as domestic workers and gardeners, and some in the central business district (CBD). A few run spaza shops (informal shops at home). Most are unemployed. This gives a clear picture of the parents' unemployment or unstable working conditions. These factors point mainly to the plethora of 'happenings' the Setswanas (a black ethnic group) of the region had been subjected to in

the past. The other black ethnic groups (Xhosa, Zulu, Sotho, and coloured) in the informal settlement find themselves in these situations mainly because of the negative spin-offs of the migrant labour system prevalent in apartheid South Africa. They or their parents (migrating from the Eastern Cape, Kwa-zulu-Natal and the Free State provinces) were mine workers in the gold mines of the area and the closing down of the mines left many unemployed. The instability of these learners' primary school years can therefore be viewed as one of the barriers to the desired primary schooling experience. Learners and their parents in this informal settlement do not have appropriate control over their school, work and social arrangements and therefore cannot necessarily choose the life they value. This instability keeps most of them vulnerable and caught up in a poverty cycle, as already more than one generation has been living in the informal settlement.

Another factor that hampers the learners who participated in the investigation is the hours they have to spend after school doing household chores. They find this tiring and feel that homework is low on their list of priorities in the afternoons. However, they regard these chores as central to the smooth running of the household and feel responsible for contributing in this way to the harmony of their home environment. These learners are also absent from school whenever there is an opportunity to boost the family income. They see the harvesting season in the Tlokwe farming community as an opportunity to earn money, and the farmers in the area make use of this cheap labour, although in most cases this is illegal because the learners are under age (C Rabothapi, A Griesel & Z Thekiso, 2007:pers. comm.). Learners are caught up in the cycle of cheap labour at an early age. As Du Plessis explains:

Many farmers in the district were so unhappy about the introduction of the minimum salary for farm labourers in 1996 and the introduction of the new tenure rights for farm labourers who stayed and worked longer than ten years on a particular farm, that they set labourers off farms, so that these labourers could not claim tenure in future. This resulted in the disruption of the learners' schooling on farm schools, so many moved to live in informal settlements (Z du Plessis, 2007:pers. comm.)

Farmers also dismissed labourers from their farms but ensured their continued labour by providing bicycles so they could cycle to work. The labourers are therefore not officially on the farmers' books and are paid as casual (temporary) workers, and so do not qualify for tenure (B Phakedi, 2007:pers. comm.). There is a problem with school absenteeism, especially with older learners whose parents are farm labourers. These learners are more prone to start working on farms at a young age and are sometimes torn between going to school and contributing to the household income by doing some work on the farm (T Bewana, 2007:pers. comm.).

All the learners at the three primary schools are given a meal at school, which indicates their dependence on the Department of Education's Primary School Nutritional Programme (PSNP). It also shows that parents in informal settlements struggle to provide one of their children's most basic needs. The PSNP has problems, however, as its success depends on proper management.

Educators said that for the older learners in the primary schools this one meal is not enough as it is the only meal for most of them for the whole day. Some learners criticise the PSNP, saying it does not live up to their expectations. If the PSNP does not provide meals for a whole month, some learners skip school until meals are provided again (R Mosala, D Mohotsehoa & A Loati, 2007:pers. comm.). Learners and educators said that about 20% of all the learners in the four schools are not certain that they will have a meal at home, and so they attend school to ensure they have access to the PSNP — an extrinsic motivation for attending school.

The issue of parental involvement is further complicated by the consequences of the HIV&AIDS pandemic. A high number of learners at School A (80%) are in the care of their grandparents (S Freddie & T Dire, 2007:pers. comm.). This presents many challenges for their education, as grandparents are often unable to care for these youngsters comprehensively. Depending mostly on old-age pensions of R850 (US\$ 93.7) per month, households usually consist of three or four adults and two to four children. They have difficulty accessing the child grants because to apply they need a birth certificate. In some cases learners do not have birth certificates and therefore households do not have access to all possible funds from government. This impairs the educational process and the learners' development. Mongale and Freddie (2007:pers. comm.) add that: 'Grandparents are tentative to apply for birth certificates as they will run the risk of losing their grandchildren to one of the state's orphanages if the Department of Social Welfare can establish that the grandparents are not fit to care for the youngsters'.

The learners who live in informal settlements said that they have to share small rooms at home, they do not have tables or desks to do homework on, they share their clothes with siblings, they do not have the privacy appropriate for their age groups, and they experience the small, cramped space at home as an unhealthy way to live. During the heavy summer rains they have further difficulties as the informal dwellings are unstable and leak. Lack of sleep at night, dirty clothing and anxiety about safety hamper their ability to participate meaningfully in their school activities. In these conditions, learners are more than ever expected to help maintain the informal structure and do the cleaning before they can go to school (A Loati, R Mosala, F Thubake & C Rabothapi, 2007:pers. comm.). Their individually valued opportunities (Osmani, 2005) are thus influenced by the changes of the seasons. They are also valued differently: some learners value the safety and cleanliness of their informal structure more than others and so they view schooling differently. Although these informal settlement learners are not without a school or without a home, the mere fact that they are subject to such conditions has a negative effect on their schooling, and at various times of the school year they are unable to make use of the educational goods and opportunities available to them.

Parents who do have jobs work in the Tlokwe CBD and need to leave their homes early; in winter they leave when it is still dark (S Freddie, 2007:pers. comm.). Having to use public transport, these parents are tired when they

come home at night and need to rest if they are to be fresh enough for the early morning trip to work the next morning. Not a lot of quality time is available to spend with their children, particularly as they often have to work at weekends as well, and learners are therefore sometimes without supervision. This means that learners are very likely to make decisions without proper parental guidance (T Dire & S Freddie, 2007:pers. comm.). Another problem is that if learners are, for example, sent to buy groceries at the nearest supermarket, using public transport to and from the CBD is expensive and takes up almost the whole day. The fact that parents work in the CBD and have to travel keeps them poor, as at least 25% of their earnings has to be used to get to work (T Bewana, T Dire & D Mongale, 2007:pers. comm.). Educators said there is inadequate communication between learners and their parents because the parents generally have no control over their working hours and employment conditions. Parents working as farm labourers, domestic workers and gardeners are rarely in a position to bargain with their employers for suitable working conditions, as their work is seasonal and casual. Sometimes these parents stay over in their working environment, and sometimes they arrive home late and tired. This affects communication in the household — learners said they very seldom discussed their school activities with their parents (A Griesel, F Thubake & D Mohotsehoa, 2007:pers. comm.). The parents' working conditions are therefore also a problem for the school/home relationship. This is another important factor in how learners view and value their schooling from a young age.

Tracing what learners regard as important to have (the things they do not have at the moment) to improve their school experience clearly illustrates their needs for basic goods. Proper clothing, suitable for all seasons, basic furniture at home, enough food for everyone at home, bigger houses, bicycles to ride to school and money are some things they mentioned. It is interesting to note that all the learners in the focus group mentioned only objectively valued opportunities, referring to the fulfilment of their basic needs. Not one respondent mentioned any individually valued opportunities.

Many learners also experience an array of negative emotions (fear, loneliness, a feeling of being misunderstood, envy and sadness) when attending school and interacting with less-poor learners and educators, because of their own poor background (D Mongale, 2007:pers. comm.).

The relevance of the funding policy for informal settlement schools is challenged in these school communities since context-specific poverty-related issues tend to negate the functionality of the North-West Department of Education's funding model (T Bewana, 2007). Although schools A, B, C and D are classified in the quintile representing the poorest 20% of schools, the poverty complexities of the school community constitute a serious challenge for the relevance of this model. Bewana (2007:pers. comm.) suggests a forum for principals to communicate their contextual challenges to the Department, in order to contextualise the province's funding policy.

The learners wanted smaller numbers per class, more educators and for the schools to improve the delivery of the PSNP. Better sports facilities and

school transport are lower on their list of desired changes. On the question of what they want to change in their lives, the answers once again corresponded with their living conditions. They focused mainly on improving income and job opportunities for the adults at home. It is also clear that they want to contribute to the improvement of their own lives, through education, and almost all of them want to be respected. The learners said these improvements would give them more control over their schooling experience in the informal settlements of Tlokwe.

The above findings clearly show the extent to which the freedoms of learners attending informal settlement schools are restricted. Their capabilities are impaired because they have to prioritise survival-related challenges, which creates an aspirational space incongruent with the desired educational view. These learners therefore have neither the freedom nor the capacity to choose the lives they value.

## Conclusion

This study contributes to the discourse on the schooling of learners attending informal settlement schools. It draws together reflection, action, theory and practice. In isolating capabilities poverty in particular, I present data that can offer a better understanding of the interface between schooling (in the new democratic education system) and poverty (in informal settlements). The manifestations of capabilities poverty highlighted indicate the complexities of schooling in informal settlements and thus the interconnected nature of poverty and education. Having access to goods and opportunities does not guarantee the desired schooling experience. Researchers, policy makers and service providers therefore need to acknowledge differentiated circumstances when looking at the education of learners in informal settlements.

## References

- Adams F & Waghid Y 2005. In defence of deliberative democracy: Challenging less democratic school governing body practices. *South African Journal of Education*, 25:25-33.
- Akinboade OA & Lalthapersad-Pillay P 2004. Poverty, gender and trade in southern Africa. *Tydskrif vir Geesteswetenskappe*, 44:193-211.
- Alcock P 1993. *Understanding poverty*. London: Macmillan.
- African National Congress (ANC) 1995. *A policy framework for education and training*. Manzini, Swaziland: Macmillan Boleswa.
- Booyens FleR 2002. Using demographic and health surveys to measure poverty: An application to South Africa. *Econometrics*, 26:53-70.
- Bronfenbrenner U 1979. *The ecology of human development*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Creswell JW 1998. *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five traditions*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- De Haan A 2000. Debates on social exclusion in the south: What have they contributed to our understanding of deprivation? Paper presented at the Uppingham Conference, 2001.
- Du Toit A 2004. 'Social exclusion' discourse and chronic poverty: A South African case study. *Development and Change*, 35:987-1010.

- Frye I 2005. *Constructing and adopting an official poverty line for South Africa: Some issues for consideration*. Johannesburg: National Labour and Economic Institute (NALEDI).
- Grant U, Hulme D, Moore K & Shepherd A 2005. *Chronic poverty report*. Available at: [www.chronicpoverty.org/pdfs/CPR1%2FINAL/pdf](http://www.chronicpoverty.org/pdfs/CPR1%2FINAL/pdf). Accessed 4 July 2007.
- Harrison C 2006. No-fee schools. *Perspectives in Education*, 24:173-175.
- Haswell M 1975. *The nature of poverty*. London: Macmillan.
- Hoffman AM 2006. *The Capability Approach and educational policies and strategies: Effective life skills education for sustainable development*. Paris: Agence Française du Développement (AFD).
- Jansen JD 2001. Rethinking education policy making in South Africa: Symbols of change, signals of conflict. In: A Kraak & M Young (eds). *Education in retrospect: Policy and implementation since 1990*. Pretoria: Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) Press.
- Kamper GD 1998. *The poverty phenomenon and educational provision: Implications thereof*. Pretoria: University of South Africa, Institute for Educational Research.
- Kvale S 1996. *InterViews: An introduction to qualitative research interviewing*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Leedy PD & Ormrod JE 2005. *Practical research: Planning and design.*, 8th edn. New Jersey: Pearson.
- Ligthelm AA 1993. *Salient features of poverty in South Africa*. Pretoria: Bureau for Market Research, University of South Africa.
- Lok-Dessallien R 2002. Review of poverty concepts and indicators. *United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) publications*. Available at: [www.undp.org/publications/poverty.html](http://www.undp.org/publications/poverty.html). Accessed 5 May 2007.
- Maarman RFA 2006. Poverty as determinant in educational provision: Exploration of life context for funding policy. Paper presented at the *British Association for International and Comparative Education*. Education and Development, Belfast, Northern Ireland, September.
- McCarthy C 1997. Nonsynchrony and social difference: An alternative to current radical accounts of race and schooling. In: AH Halsey, H Lauder, P Brown & A Stuart Wells (eds). *Education, culture, economy and society*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Nussbaum M & Sen A 1993. *The quality of life*. New York & Oxford: Clarendon.
- Osmani SR 2005. Poverty and human rights: Building on the Capability Approach. *Journal of Human Development*, 6:205-219.
- Pillay J 2004. Experiences of learners from informal settlements. *South African Journal of Education*, 24:5-9.
- Price RM 1991. *The apartheid state in crisis: Political transformation in South Africa, 1975-1990*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Prinsloo E 2004. The impact of poverty and social economic decline on the new education dispensation in South Africa. *Tydskrif vir Geesteswetenskappe*, 44:158-166.
- Quesada, C 2001. *Amartya Sen and the thousand faces of poverty*. Available at [www.globalpolicy.org/socecon/develop/2001/1025sen.htm](http://www.globalpolicy.org/socecon/develop/2001/1025sen.htm). Accessed 16 September 2008.
- Rawls J 1971. *A theory of justice*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Robeyns I 2003. *The capability approach: An interdisciplinary introduction*. Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam.
- Sayed Y 2003. Educational exclusion and inclusion: Key debates and issues. *Perspectives in Education*, 21:1-12.

- Sen A 1980. Equality of what? *1979 Tanner Lecture* delivered at Stanford University.
- Sen A 1987. *On ethics and economics*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Sen A 1992. *Inequality reexamined*. New York & Oxford: Clarendon.
- Slee R 2001. Inclusion in practice: Does practice make perfect? *Educational Review*, 53:113-123.
- Soudien C 1998. The debate on equality and equity in South African education. In: M Cross, Z Mkwanazi-Twala & G Klein (eds). *Dealing with diversity in South African education: A debate on politics of a national curriculum*. Cape Town: Juta.
- Spies PH 2004. Applications of social system theory for poverty alleviation in South Africa. *Tydskrif vir Geesteswetenskappe*, 44:98-114.
- StatsSA (Statistics South Africa) 2007a. *Income survey*. Available at: [www.statssa.gov.za/publications/statsdownload.asp](http://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/statsdownload.asp). Accessed August 2007.
- StatsSA (Statistics South Africa) 2007b. *Labour force survey*. Available at: [www.statssa.gov.za/publications/statskeyfindings.asp?PPN=P0210&SCH=3890](http://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/statskeyfindings.asp?PPN=P0210&SCH=3890). Accessed September 2007.
- Terreblanche S 2004. Poverty in South Africa. *Tydskrif vir Geesteswetenskappe*, 44:213-240.
- Van Aardt C 2007. Gap between rich and poor increasing. *Rapport*, 8 April.
- Zhang Y 2006. Urban-rural literacy gaps in sub-Saharan Africa. *Comparative Education Review*, 50:581-602.

### Author

Rouaan Maarman holds a PhD in Comparative Education and is a Senior Lecturer at the University of the Western Cape. He is a Thuthuka grant holder and his research focuses on poverty and education. He is also researching the history of poverty and the South African education system.