

## Abstract

Subject choices afford differential opportunities to children when they leave school. Mathematics offers more elite, post-school education and employment opportunities. The introduction of Mathematical Literacy in post-Apartheid schooling was framed as a democratic imperative to provide all learners with some mathematical knowledge. The supposed choice between the two subjects has to be made by adolescents at the end of grade 9 for grade 10 to grade 12. However, subjects are not particularly 'chosen' by the learners. Rather, the schools allocate them to a stream that is determined by their previous academic performance. Subject allocation interacts with the self-perceptions that adolescents have of their capability to succeed in school. In Phase one, 356 learners in two schools were surveyed. The Mathematics learners surveyed attributed their subject choice primarily to their intended careers and tertiary study. Mathematical Literacy learners emphasised the ease of the subject, that they could not qualify for Mathematics, and that they did not feel that they had the required skills for Mathematics. The perception that a lack of ability and natural skill is the fault of the learner is entrenched by these statements, and serves as a foundation for the acceptance of inequality. In Phase two, the data from the individual interviews with 11 adolescent girls was analysed, and the themes formulated were that Mathematical Literacy was easier and more accessible for the Mathematical Literacy learners, that high school was very different from primary school, that the cultural capital conferred by Mathematics will allow them to live up to the investments from their parents and teachers, and that sex and sexuality poses a threat to their futures. Subjects that a learner does at school impact on identity formation in that it controls the cultural capital that an individual has access to. Subject allocation confers senses of self-worth, capability, and opportunity. Subject 'choice' directs the path of the learner/individual, emphasising the school's (as institution) role in the reproduction of inequalities through race, class and gender.

**Keywords:** Mathematics, Mathematical Literacy, Identity, Cultural capital, Schooling