

Inching along: educational survival in South Africa Part 1

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Abstract

High Gross Enrolment Rates in basic education suggest that South Africa is close to achieving universal primary access, a key Millennium Development Goal. But numbers begin to drop quite dramatically in secondary school and achievement levels are alarming low so that learners are moving through the grades but without necessarily attaining the learning outcomes prescribed by curriculum. The routine of school seems established but with learners increasingly being left behind academically and more and more vulnerable to repetition and dropping-out.

This paper reviews literature and statistics to present a picture of current access patterns in South Africa and attempts to explain those patterns. It identifies the socio-economic factors in communities and schools that add stress on vulnerable learners, eventually (and inevitably) leading to their exclusion from school. Further, we argue for greater attention to be paid at points of entry and repetition

¹ This project is funded by DFID. The author also acknowledges editorial support provided by Mario Pillay

Introduction

Access to primary schooling is used in this paper beyond a nominal count of ‘bums on seats’. It includes initial entry and transition through the grades and also begins to probe the question of ‘access to what?’ (where learners have physical access to schools but not epistemic access). The Consortium for Research on Education, Access, Transitions and Equity (CREATE), to which this paper contributes, is interested in discerning who is excluded from primary education, at which points and why. Exclusion from basic education is understood as a process culminating in an event with multiple causalities. We use the term ‘zones of vulnerability’ to describe the various spaces where children are included, excluded, or are at risk. Initial access has little meaning unless it results in (i) regular attendance (ii) progression (iii) meaningful learning and (iv) appropriate access to post-primary education.

Zone 1 contains those who have never been to, and are unlikely ever to, attend school.

Zone 2 includes those who entered primary school, but do not complete it. Pre-cursors to drop out include repetition, low achievement, poor teaching, degraded facilities, very large classes, household poverty, and poor health and nutrition.

Zone 3 includes those in school but who are in danger of dropping out.

Zone 4 contains those who complete primary schooling but fail to go further into secondary schooling. This exclusion is important for EFA since transition rates into secondary affect demand for primary schooling, primary teacher supply depends on secondary graduates, and gender equity at secondary is an MDG (Lewin, 2005a). Access to secondary schooling promotes the social mobility needed to give poor households more access to higher income employment.

This paper begins with an overview of access patterns before turning attention to the statistics of each zone of exclusion.

Overview of access²

Demand side factors

Data from Census 2001 shows that there were 17.38 million children in South Africa below the age of 18 years³. African children constituted the majority of these at 83.6%, (or 14,5 million) followed by coloured children at 8.5% (or 1.49 million); and whites at 5.9% (or 1.03 million) and Indians at 1.8% (or 328 505). Girls constituted a slight

² Given the complexity of the transformation processes in South Africa, and the relatively recent development of information systems, which are still evolving, there are often contradictory pictures that emerge from various sources of data. By far the most comprehensive, and to an extent fairly robust databases in relation to education is data from the Department of Education (EMIS Directorate) and Statistics South Africa. Continuing efforts are made to improve these datasets, and in the absence of other reliable sources, they are used extensively although with some caution in some instances.

³ Calculated from Census 2001 data

majority at 50.2%. Of the 17,38 million children in South Africa, 13 million were in the age category of 5 – 17 years⁴.

Between 1991 and 2004 school enrolments increased by 16%. Growth in primary enrolments was at 3.5%. Only three grades show an overall decline during this period. Grade 1 enrolment shows the biggest decline (at 13.4%), followed by grade 2 and grade 5 at 2.5% and 2.3% respectively. The high decline recorded in grade 1 is probably as a result of the introduction of age-grade norms and the partial introduction of grade R.

The highest increase was recorded at secondary level, with nearly 50% growth. The numbers peaked in 1998, and gradually declined following the introduction of the age specific enrolment requirements in the late 1990s which led to a number of inappropriately aged children (under-age and overage) being removed from the system.

The gender differences in South Africa is not as skewed as in other Sub-Saharan countries. According to Bot (2003), girls start out as a slight minority in the early primary grades (48% of enrolment), they constitute 50% of enrolment by grade 6 and 55% of enrolment in grade 12. Using the gender parity index indicator, Bot (2003) suggests improvements in the GPI since the mid 1990s. In 1997, a primary GPI of 0.88 was recorded, but this had improved to 0.95 by 2001.

The gender parity index (GPI) from 2000 to 2004 shows some significant improvements in the Eastern Cape, Free State, Limpopo and Western Cape, which showed GPI ratios of more than 1.00 for the five year period in grades 1 to 12. This indicates that in proportion to the appropriate school-age population, there were more female learners than males in the ordinary school system (DoE, 2005:17).

Supply side factors

Interestingly, the number of schools (primary and secondary) decreased from 27 461 in 1999 to 25 840 in 2003 (-5.9%). All provinces, except Limpopo, recorded a drop in institutional numbers, with the Free State dropping by as much as 26.1%. This is probably due to the closure of small schools, particularly farm schools.

Independent schools increased by 23% in the same period. However, their numbers remain small (1005 institutions in 2005) and their enrolment represents just xx% of total learners numbers nationally. Independent schools, therefore, do not act to significantly improve access (Lewin and Sayed, 2005).

The fairly large number of small schools, 1-4 classrooms (6137 in total, 25%) indicates that schools are located in areas that are not densely populated minimizing distance between home and school. The Eastern Cape has close to 3200 schools with fewer than nine classrooms and 70% of schools in the Free State are small (Education Foundation, 2006, p62).

⁴ The 5 to 17 year age category is widely used in relation to child labour. We also use this category in this document.

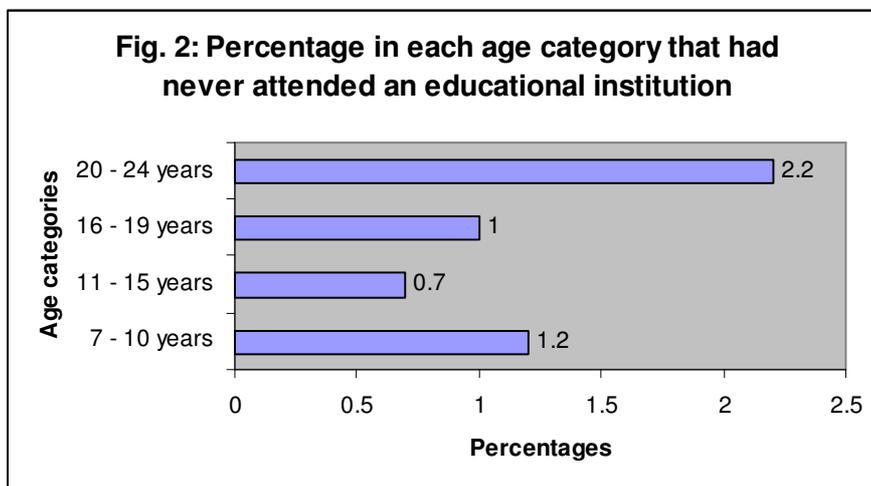
However, national learner: classroom ratios of 38:1 reported in the 2000 School Register of Needs suggest that schools are slightly over-capacity (the target is 34:1 in primary schools and 32:1 in secondary schools CHECK). This ratio was well above average in Eastern Cape, Mpumalanga and Limpopo (49:1, 50:1 and 40:1 respectively).

Figure 27: Classroom shortages and surpluses

The difference between gross and net classroom shortages shows there is a problem with the distribution of classrooms. Reasons: poor infrastructure planning resulted in schools built in areas where population was declining or there was not really a demand in the first place. Massive learner migration from qualitatively worse to better schools (DoE, 2003:98).

Zone of exclusion 1

In South Africa, the number of children who have never been to school, and are unlikely ever to attend school, is very small. According to Statistics South Africa (2005) just under 1% of children aged 7 to 19 years had never attended school in 2004. Figure 2 below shows the distribution of people in different age categories that had never attended an educational institution in 2004. The numbers confirm that access to schooling has improved in the post-apartheid decade. The slightly larger number of learners in the 7-10 age group (1.2%) than in the 11-15 age group (0.7%) suggests that over-aged learners will still enter the system



Source: Statistics South Africa, 2005:

Learners with special educational needs (narrowly defined as those with physical or definite cognitive disability) are likely to account for a significant proportion of children who never enter grade 1.

Zone of exclusion 2

This zone of exclusion includes those children who enter primary schools but do not complete it.

There is some debate in South Africa on the extent and nature of the primary school drop-out. The most pessimistic reports suggest that approximately 65% of children who enrolled at primary level reached grade 5 in 2001 (Human Development Report, 2003: 272 – 273). Statements accompanying such figures have suggested that as much as 35% of children leave school before they can attain basic levels of functional literacy as they do not reach grade 5.

The October Household Survey (Statistics SA, 2000) calculates that a total of 431 000 7-15-year-olds (approximately 4.5%) were not attending any educational institution in 1999 (cf. Bot, 2005).

The Department of Education estimates that there are approximately 280 000 children and youth outside the system (DoE, Directorate Inclusive Education, June 2005: 21).

There are those who argue that the differences between those enrolling and those reaching grade 5 is largely due to high repetition rates, especially at grade 1 level, despite the age-grade norms introduced in the 1990s (Crouch, 2005). Crouch further indicates that such repetition is not reported as repetition, especially since there are high over-enrolment rates at grade 1 because of lack of access to early childhood development opportunities in many communities.

A fairly comprehensive picture emerges from recent analysis by Shindler (2005). Based on an analysis of Net Enrolment Ratio (NER), which reflects that number of learners in the system who are appropriately aged for the level of school they are enrolled in, Shindler (2005) suggests that as much as 11% of children aged 7 to 15 (appropriate age for the compulsory phase of schooling) were either out of school or enrolled in secondary schools (FET band) in 2001. This situation is shown in the table below

Table 3 Net enrolment ratios (percentage) by level and province, 2001

<i>Province</i>	<i>Primary (Gr 1-7)</i>	<i>Compulsory (Gr 1-9)</i>	<i>Secondary (Gr 8-12)</i>	<i>Total (Gr 1-12)</i>
Eastern Cape	101.7	96.1	50.3	91.1
Free State	89.0	87.0	61.9	86.6
Gauteng	89.7	87.4	66.0	84.6
KwaZulu-Natal	91.3	88.7	60.2	86.4
Limpopo	90.9	88.1	65.1	87.5
Mpumalanga	87.4	85.7	63.1	84.6
North West	86.8	85.1	61.5	84.7

Northern Cape	94.6	91.8	59.7	87.8
Western Cape	88.4	86.5	64.2	81.7
National	91.9	89.0	60.8	86.5
<i>Sources: Shindler, 2005 (Analysis from Enrolment data from Department of Education, 2004a and 2004b; Population data from Statistics SA, 2003(a))</i>				

Whereas the national average shows a NER in the primary phase of 92% and a NER of 89% in the GET band, the table above reveals provincial differences in the NER, with provinces such as the North West and Mpumalanga recording NERs of 86.8% and 87.4% respectively. Shindler suggests that NER of 102% in the Eastern Cape is a result of problems with the data, and that estimates provided by other analysts of approximately 90% may be more realistic.

Given the difficulties of deducing whether children who are not accounted for in the NER figures captured above (are they out-of-school or in other parts of the system other than that appropriate for their age?) other measurements are required in order to fully grasp the extent of access to education. One of these measures is the age specific enrolment ratio.

Age specific enrolment ratio refers to the proportion of children of a specific age enrolled in school irrespective of the grade of phase they are enrolled in. By doing this, one is able to ascertain the proportion of children of school going age who are not in school. It would also indicate whether underage or over-aged children are enrolled in the inappropriate phase of schooling. The table below shows the proportion of learners according to age group enrolled in school and estimate of out of school

Table 4 Proportion of children in the population according to age group enrolled in school and out of school, 2001

Province	7-13 years enrolled	7-13 years out of school	7-15 years enrolled	7-15 years out of school	14-18 years enrolled	14-18 years out of school	7-18 years enrolled	7-18 years out of school
Eastern Cape	102.6	-	98.2	1.8	74.8	25.2	91.3	8.7
Free State	90.6	9.4	90.3	9.7	82.4	17.6	87.1	12.9
Gauteng	91.8	8.2	91.8	8.2	75.3	24.7	84.8	15.2
KwaZulu-Natal	93.9	6.1	92.2	7.8	76.5	23.5	86.7	13.3
Limpopo	95.1	4.9	93.5	6.5	82.3	17.7	89.9	10.1
Mpumalanga	88.9	11.1	88.4	11.6	79.0	21.0	84.8	15.2
North West	87.8	12.2	87.6	12.4	80.1	19.9	84.7	15.3
Northern Cape	95.9	4.1	94.3	5.7	78.1	21.9	88.5	11.5
Western Cape	90.4	9.6	91.6	8.4	71.4	28.6	82.3	17.7
National	94.0	6.0	92.6	7.4	77.3	22.7	87.1	12.9
<i>Sources: Enrolment data from Department of Education, 2004a and 2004b; Population data from Statistics SA, 2003(a)</i>								

The table suggests that 7.4% of children aged 7 to 15 were out of school in 2001. This

figure increases to 13% when the age group 7 to 18 is considered. There were provincial differences, with provinces such as Mpumalanga and North West having the most number of children aged 7 to 15 out of school.

Recent data on geographical differences is scarce, but an analysis undertaken by Statistics South Africa based on 1996 data suggested that as much as 66% of children aged 7 in rural areas were attending school, compared to 82% of children in the same age group in urban areas. Amongst 8 year olds, the figure for urban and rural areas was 90% and 76% respectively (Stats SA, 2001:9). Overall, the gap between urban and rural areas narrowed as the age increased, with 95% and 91% of urban and rural children respectively aged 15 attending school.

In sum, then, the vast majority of learners do complete primary education – though repetition and late entry appear as main challenges. The effects of the introduction of age-grade norms and the policy preventing learners from repeating more than one grade in each phase will need to be carefully explored.

Exclusion zone 3

The third zone of exclusion refers to those in school but who are in danger of dropping out. Children who remain formally enrolled in school may be silently excluded if their attendance is sporadic, their achievement so low that they cannot follow the curriculum, or if they are discriminated against for socio-cultural reasons.

Recent studies on the performance of South African children in basic numeracy and literacy suggest that while learners may be in schools, they do not perform at levels that are expected for the particular age groups (Moloi, Undated; JET? HSRC). In 2000, South Africa took part in the second SACMEQ project, which involved testing grade 6 learners in reading (literacy) and mathematics (numeracy). Moloi analyzes the SACMEQ levels of competency in relation to the curriculum and concludes that SACMEQ standards were more or less equivalent with the outcomes identified for learners in South Africa for mathematics. For numeracy, Moloi indicated that the modal level of competence achieved by the majority of South African learners was emergent numeracy, which, according to corresponding assessment standards in (the South African) curriculum, is equivalent of grade 3.

Just over 44% of learners who had been in school for at least six years, could be said to be performing at the level of a child who had been in school for three years. About 24% performed at Basic Numeracy level, which is equivalent to grade 4, nearly 9% performed at Beginning numeracy level (grade 5) and only 6% performed at the Competent numeracy level (grade 6). The percentages diminished up the competency ladder and only about one percent achieved at Independent numeracy level which was considered equivalent to grade 7 or higher (Moloi:7).

Similar results have emerged from the Grade 6 Systemic Evaluation report (DoE, 2005). Nationally, the maths achievement by grade 6 learners shows that more than 80% of

learners recorded a “not achieved” score, with a further 8% recording a partly achieved score. For the languages, the situation is not any better as more than 60% of learners nationally recorded a “Not Achieved” score.

The provincial differences are more pronounced, with provinces such as Limpopo being the worst performer in both Mathematics and language at 95% and 86% “not achieved” for the respective learning areas.

HIV/Aids

While it is statistically difficult to assess the extent of learners in Zone 3, the impact of the HIV/Aids pandemic is likely to contribute significantly to learners ‘at risk’ of dropping out and attention is therefore drawn here to children affected by the disease.

The table below shows estimates of orphans in South Africa from 1990 to 2005

Table 6: Estimates of orphans in South Africa, 1990 to 2005

	1990	1995	2001	2005
No. of children 0 – 14	13939000	24405000	14733000	14817000
Tot. no. of orphans	1089000	1087000	1528000	2069000
Tot. orphans as % of all children	8%	8%	10%	14%
Tot. no. of orphans due to Aids	1000	61000	662000	1328000
Aids orphans as % of total orphans	0.1%	6%	43%	64%

Source: Case 2003:11

The table shows that the number of aids orphans have been increasing at a fast rate over the 15 year period. This is likely to increase the vulnerability of children in relation to schooling.

A 2000 report on the impact of HIV/AIDS on the education sector (Coombe 2000) claims that HIV/AIDS will result in higher mortality rates at all ages, and that by 2005 nearly 1 million children will be without one or both parents. By 2015, when the epidemic is expected to peak, orphans will constitute between 9% and 12% of the total population of South Africa, or number about 3,6 to 4,8 million children. This is likely to create increased number of vulnerable children, increased pressure on households and children, increased demands on public and private services, increased burden on community, and increased risk that susceptible children will engage in survival activities (including sex) which implies a higher risk of HIV infection.

The implications for the continued attendance of these children in schools require careful investigation, so that appropriate responses can be formulated.

In sum, zone 3 is an important zone in South Africa given the poor quality of outcomes in systemic evaluations for a majority of learners.

Zone of exclusion 4

This zone includes those children who complete primary schooling but fail to go further into secondary schooling; also for reasons such as poverty, transport costs, etc.

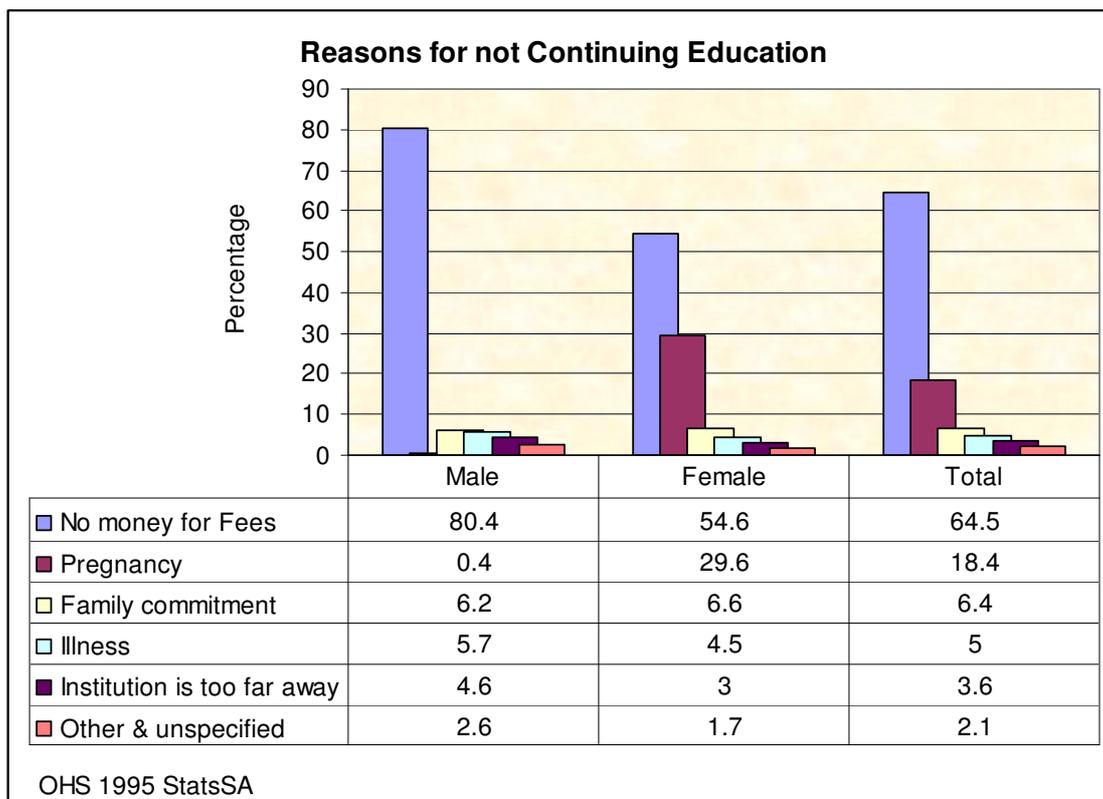
Participation at secondary schooling in South Africa has increased dramatically over the past 20 years. Between 1991 and 2004, participation at secondary level increased by 49%. This may be explained by the fact that in the mid-1990s, the first two grades of secondary schooling (grades 8 and 9) were declared as part of the compulsory schooling system.

However, retention through secondary schools is low. The national NER average is 60.8% in secondary schools in 2001. Some provinces, such as the Eastern Cape are notable by the low NER at secondary level – which was 50.3% in 2001. According to the Department of Education (2003) out of every 100 learners in ordinary school, slightly less than 10 were in Grade 1, and just over four were enrolled in Grade 12. The report goes on to suggest that this could be an indication of high drop out rates between Grades 1 and 12, with only 40% of learners continuing to Grade 12.

Figure 2 presents the main reasons preventing 15 to 18 year olds, who are not attending school from continuing their education. It is very clear that the main constraint facing these individuals was a financial one: two-thirds (64.5%) indicated that they did not have enough money to continue their education. Amongst males, the rate was significantly higher at (80.4%) compared to (54.6%) for females. The second most important reason overall is pregnancy. Nearly three in ten females in this group responded that pregnancy prevented their continued education. Other reasons accounted for only 17%

One possible increase in the cost associated with secondary schools in transport. While in 2004 there were 15 919 primary schools, these were consolidated into 5 701 public secondary schools (Education Foundation, 2006, p131).

Figure 2: Reasons for not continuing education, non-matriculated, 15-18 year olds, 1995



Conclusion

This paper provided a statistical overview of access issues in South Africa. It shows that most children enroll and complete primary schools though late entry and high repetition rates signal inefficient transition. Poor quality outcomes characterize the system yet this has not compromised access to primary education – though it may partly provide an explanation for the high drop-out rate in secondary schools in that learners may be unable to keep up with curriculum demands. Demand for education has not been affected by poor learning outcomes. Positively, this indicates a general culture of school going, but on the other hand, it may also show that parents are not making purposive choices to send their children to school.

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