



Marking time

Inefficiencies in the schooling system and possible responses

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Introduction

It is not new to note that South Africa has an inefficient schooling system. The adjective ‘inefficient’ has most commonly be used to refer to the cost of education provision relative to very low educational output or learning outcomes (School of Education, 1999; Taylor et al, 2011). This poor quality ‘output’ can be seen in local and international assessments such as the Department of Education’s Systemic Evaluations, and the TIMMS, PIRLS and SACMEQ studies respectively.¹ Yet the inefficiency of South Africa’s patterns of school participation is less often referred to and requires closer attention by policy makers than it has received. These patterns are characterised by high enrolment rates well beyond compulsory school-going age and phase, high rates of grade repetition and low levels of Grade 12 completion.

In the first section of the essay I will show that the poor quality of education provided to most South African learners is at the heart of this inefficiency – as a primary cause of both grade repetition and school drop-out. Further, I will present devastating findings on the poor feedback mechanisms in many South African schools², which suggest that many of those learners who were made to repeat grades before reaching Matric, performed academically better than their peers who did not. This compounds inefficiencies in the system.

The causes of poor quality education in South Africa, “historical, complex and... multi-faceted” (Chisholm, 2012), are beyond the scope of this essay. Nonetheless, resultant inefficiencies raise some possibly uncomfortable questions about the de facto and intended role of senior secondary education in South Africa. The exact purpose of senior secondary education is debated and contested internationally – as is the appropriate proportion of the

¹Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study, 2002; the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study results, 2006; the Southern and Eastern African Consortium for Monitoring Education Quality surveys of 2000 and 2007.

²See Lam et al, 2008 and 2010, and van der Berg and Shepherd, 2010.

population completing this level of education, and the content this second phase of schooling should take (Matseleng Allais, 2005). Levels of completion of senior secondary education are high, and increasing, and are a fairly recent phenomena (Matseleng Allais, 2005) in developed and developing countries respectively, driven largely by perceptions about the positive relationship between a more qualified population on the one hand and economic growth and employment on the other.

In the South African case, I will question the assumption circulating in popular debates that we should aim for ever increasing numbers of people completing a senior secondary education, *to the extent* that this focus detracts from other policy options which may be better suited to our schooling system, given our current patterns of school participation.

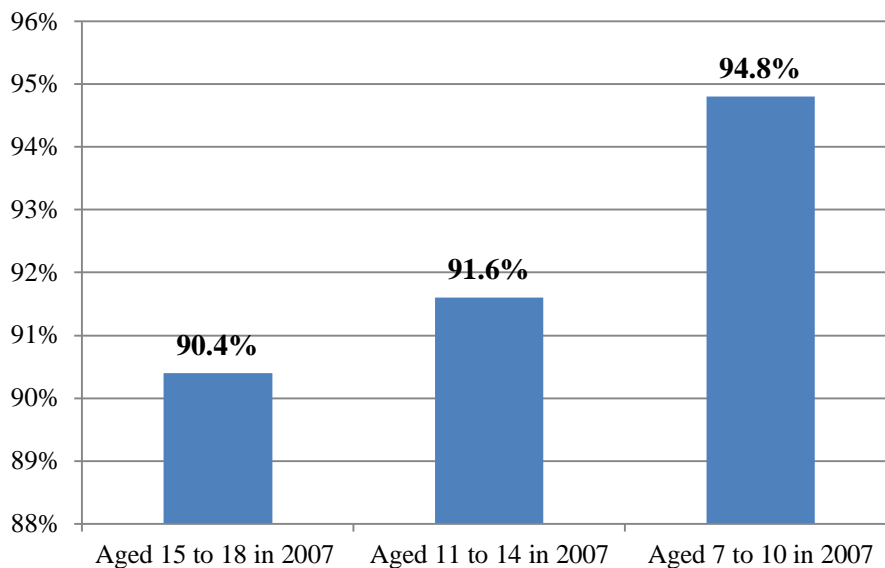
Reducing inefficiencies in the system and improving senior secondary completion rates requires major improvements in the quality of school education provided to our learners. This, however, is a long term endeavour. What might our responses be in the interim?

An inefficient schooling system: trends and causes

The vast majority of children enter schooling at the correct age in South Africa.³ Data from the Social Surveys-CALS household survey of 2007 shows an increasing trend in enrolment at the correct age or younger (see Figure 1). Enrolment in pre-primary education is also increasing, with 71% of learners enrolled in Grade 1 having previously attended a pre-primary programme (Department of Basic Education, 2011).

³Children have to start school at age seven or age six if they will turn seven before June. As of 2004, children aged five turning six before 30 June can be admitted to Grade 1, although seven remains the age at which compulsory education begins. School attendance is compulsory up until the age of 15 or on completion of Grade 9, whichever comes first.

Figure 1: percentage of learners enrolled before the age of eight, 2007



n=2664, n=2866, n=2817. Source: Household Survey, Access to Education Study, 2007. Reproduced from Meny-Gibert and Russell, 2010.

High levels of enrolment continue well after the compulsory school going age (fifteen years), with just under a third (30%) of 20 year olds still in school.⁴ Yet less than 50% of South African youth complete the full school curriculum. Over the last eight years, the completion rate for the FET phase of schooling has varied between 40% and 44% (Department of Basic Education, 2011),⁵ with large differences in completion rates for different race groups. While 72% of white youth between 25 and 29 years have completed Grade 12, this figure is 40% for black youths.⁶

Drop out from the schooling system occurs throughout the school grades, with a drop-out rate ranging from 0.5% to 2.7% for the primary school grades, but spiking in the FET grades from 6.5% at the end of the General Education and Training phase (GET)⁷ to 12% and 13% for grades 10 and 11

⁴ Own calculation, using data from the General Household Survey analysed by Gustafsson, 2011. See 'Appendix'.

⁵ The completion rate is the percentage of the population of a given age that has completed a given level of education. The figure here uses the age of 24 to take into account repetition, late entry into school and dropping out of school and returning (Department of Basic Education, 2011).

⁶ National Income Dynamics Survey data, 2008 (de Vos, 2011).

⁷ The General Education and Training Band comprises grades R to 9.

respectively.⁸ There is not, therefore, a clear exit of youth out of school when compulsory schooling ends.

Explaining the inefficiency of patterns of school participation – the phenomenon of very high enrolment rates well beyond the compulsory school going age and yet low completion rates – requires answering two interrelated questions: why do youth leave the schooling system, and, at the same time, why do they stay?⁹

I will turn first to the question of why South Africa youth remain in school beyond compulsory school going age. The average learner in South Africa takes a protracted journey through school, caused primarily by high levels of grade repetition. In 2009, 9% of those in school were repeating a grade (from 7.2% in grade 1 to a peak of 17.2% of learners in Grade 10). According to a UNESCO report, repetition rates for developing countries average 5% and for developed countries, less than 1% (cited in Department of Basic Education, 2011). Other causes of school delays leave a less significant mark than repetition in South Africa. As shown above, children enter school at the correct age and lengthy absences from school ('dropping in and out') are not common (Strassburg et al, 2010).

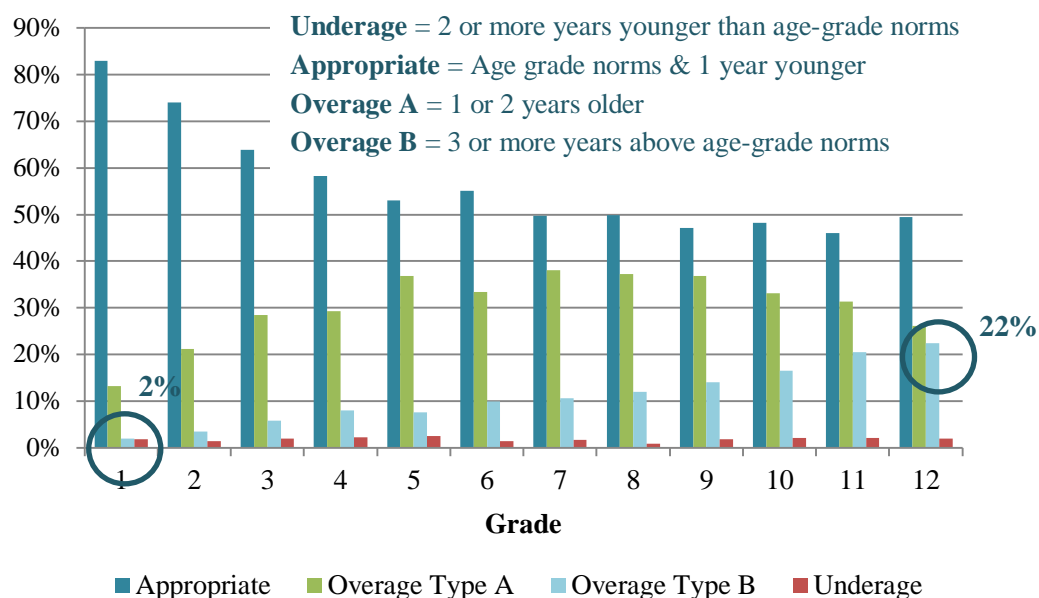
A substantial proportion of the school population is therefore a number of years above the age-grade norms¹⁰. The data below (see Figure 2) is from the Social Surveys-CALS survey of 2007 and shows the extent of over-age learners in South African schools. Eight percent of learners in the GET phase (here showing grades 1 to 9) were three or more years above the age-grade norms, as were 19% of those in the FET phase. This figure reaches 22% for Grade 12 (Meny-Gibert and Russell, 2010). Whilst there is a slightly decreasing percentage of children and youth experiencing school delays in South Africa, over-age youth and a large spread of ages in each grade (Social Surveys African and CALS, 2010) remains a defining trend of school participation in South Africa.

⁸As shown by the National Income Dynamics Survey datasets (drop-out rates computed from 2007 and 2008 data).

⁹ The later question was prompted by a comment by Veerle Dieltiens: Reference Group meeting, Social Surveys-CALS Study on Access to Education, 2007.

¹⁰ The age-grade norms specify how old children should be in each grade (i.e. if their progression through the system has not been delayed). This is calculated by adding 6 to the grade number (age seven in Grade 1, age eight in Grade 2, and so on).

Figure 2: overage learners in South African schools (2007)



n=9252. Source: Household Survey, Access to Education Study, 2007. Reproduced from Meny-Gibert and Russell, 2010.

The profile of learners who are significantly older than their peers closely mirrors the profile of those who have experienced multiple grade repetition. Household survey data from 2007 shows that black and coloured learners are far more likely to repeat grades, and do so repeatedly, than white or Indian learners, with black children six times more likely to repeat a grade than white children (Meny-Gibert and Russell, 2010). These results most plausibly point to continuing inequalities of access to good schooling for most black and coloured learners (Meny-Gibert and Russell, 2010).

Figure 3: Extent of repetition by race (shown for all learners, from Grades 1 to 12 in 2007)

	Total repeated	Repeated once	Repeated twice	Repeated three times or more
Black	37.0%	23.4%	8.9%	4.6%
Coloured	27.8%	20.0%	6.1%	1.7%
Indian	3.5%	3.5%	0.0%	0.0%
White	6.5%	5.8%	0.6%	0.0%

n=9060. Source: Household Survey, Access to Education Study, 2007. Reproduced from Meny-Gibert and Russell, 2010.

The link between learning outcomes and grade repetition in South Africa, however, need to be carefully interpreted: evidence from the Cape Area Panel Survey (CAP) shows that while the probability of a learner repeating was correlated to academic performance on the CAP performance tests for learners attending historically black schools, this correlation was weak, and far weaker than for learners in ‘former’ white or Indian schools (Lam et al, 2008).

In poorly performing schools in South Africa, accessed overwhelmingly by low income black children and youth, grade repetition is a poor indicator of whether or not a learner has made academic progress. This is most likely caused by educators in these schools not accurately assessing the progress of their learners. Analysis by others has pointed to similar findings about the weak correlation between school assessment of learners’ progress and learners’ actual academic performance (see van der Berg and Shepherd, 2010 and Lam, Ardington and Leibbrandt, forthcoming, both cited in Gustafsson et al, 2010). The implications of these findings are that many of those who were made to repeat performed academically better than their peers who did not. This poor feedback mechanism in poorly performing South African schools compounds the inefficiencies of the system outlined above.

Let us return to the question of why youth remain in school beyond compulsory school age. It is very likely that the labour market also plays a key role. School attendance in South Africa has a low opportunity cost in the context of high youth unemployment: one in every two youth below the age of 25 looking for work is unemployed (National Treasury, 2011). At the same time, youth may remain enrolled in school after Grade 9 based on their (and/or their families’) understanding of the relative returns on Matric in the form of improved employment prospects and better wage earnings. While is it not clear precisely what information and perceptions different households in South Africa hold about the returns on Matric, anecdotal evidence from a number of communities in Limpopo and Gauteng suggest young South Africans do associate having a Matric with increased employment prospects and with the chances of upward mobility through access to higher education.¹¹

¹¹ Focus groups undertaken by Social Surveys Africa as part of the Access to Education Study; in Thembelihle and Diepkloof Extension (Soweto) in Gauteng in

Why then do youth drop out before completing Grade 12? There are now a number of household surveys which ask respondents to report on the reasons for children and youths having dropped out of school.¹² Financial constraints emerges as the most commonly provided reason for leaving school, followed by teenage pregnancy, leaving school with the intention of seeking work and having failed examinations, or experiences of multiple grade repetition.

National Income Dynamics Survey data suggests that the primary driver of the drop out in secondary school is lack of finance, followed by pregnancy and leaving school with the intention of seeking work (Gustafsson, 2011). Respondents in the 2009 General Household Survey point to financial constraints as the biggest catalyst for drop out, affecting 28% of those aged 20 or younger who are not enrolled in education and have not completed Grade 12, followed by failing the examinations, pregnancy and leaving to seek for work (Gustafsson, 2011). Social Surveys-CALS data from 2007 on reasons for drop out for 7 to 18 year olds is not dissimilar, although leaving to seek work did not emerge as a cause of drop out (Strassburg et al, 2010). Factors related to poverty were the most commonly mentioned responses for children and youths aged seven to 18 years. Teenage pregnancy emerged as the next most commonly mentioned catalyst for drop out – clearly affecting female youth – and disengagement from and lack of interest in schooling the next most commonly mentioned reason for young men. Repetition and grade failure, as well as academic struggle was the third most common reason for young men and women (Strassburg et al, 2010).

Given that all three of these national data sets suggest that ‘financial constraints’ (in the context of household poverty) is the most common reason for drop out, should we conclude that poverty is the primary driver of low completion rates in South Africa? I have proposed elsewhere that in fact financial constraints are not the primary reason for school drop out (Meny-Gibert, 2012). Children and youths seldom leave school permanently for one reason only, but rather because of the compounded effects (over time)

2007 and Bekkersdal in Gauteng in 2010; in Modimolle in Limpopo in 2007 and Bolobedu in Limpopo in (2010). Unpublished, Social Surveys Africa.

¹²Including 2007 data from the Social Surveys-CALS study, data from the National Income Dynamics Survey (2007 and 2008) and from the annual General Household Survey.

of a cluster of forces (Strassburg et al, 2010). The reasons provided by respondents in household surveys for leaving school – coded for statistical reasons into simple groups of answers – provide insight into the catalysts for leaving school, but insight into the broader processes at work in pushing youth out of school requires piecing together evidence from these surveys, additional data on trends in school participation, as well as more in-depth qualitative data. What are the factors which households and youths taken into account when deciding to leave school to seek work? Or when youth report that they left school because of a lack of interest? What makes some female learners more vulnerable to falling pregnant than others?

In-depth qualitative fieldwork undertaken in Limpopo and Gauteng communities amongst secondary school youth in 2007 and 2010 suggested that lack of academic progress, feeling alienated and disengaged from their education, being over-age and experiences of multiple grade repetition are significant drivers of drop out in the FET phase (Strassburg et al, 2010 and Meny-Gibert and Russell, forthcoming).

It is also possible that the poor feedback mechanism in poorly performing schools outlined earlier in this essay could affect youth's experience of schooling and their decisions about whether or not to persevere in their schooling (Lam, Ardington and Leibbrandt, forthcoming, cited in Gustafsson et al, 2011).

If financial constraints in the context of household poverty is the main driver of drop out, then why does poverty hit in grades 10 and 11 where drop out is highest? New analysis of survey data by Gustafsson shows that "Grade 12 enrolments are fairly evenly spread across the socio-economic quintiles (the poor are not under-enrolled in Grade 12)." (Gustafsson, 2011). It bears repeating that there is a spread of youths of different ages in these grades due to the high level of schools delays¹³ in South Africa. In addition, whilst the age of successive grade attainment has dropped over the last few years, youth are still dropping out in the same grades (Gustafsson, 2011).

The clue to the drivers of drop out can be found in the schooling system itself (more precisely in the school phase), rather than at the level of the community or household (such as pressure to leave school to seek work). The impact of the accumulated deficit of poor learning in schools appears to

¹³ Late entry into the school system, temporary drop out, repetition.

manifest in learners' own experience of their school education – and manifests most starkly in the FET phase of schooling. More research is needed as to why this is the case and whether this has something to do with the nature of the curriculum, or curriculum assessment.

Household surveys suggest that after 'financial constraints', teenage pregnancy is a major driver of drop out for female youth. Yet even here, youths' experience of their education and of their academic progress plays a significant role. Whilst the causes of teenage pregnancy are complex (including lack of access to information and to contraception, social constructions of gender, associated power relations between the genders and so on), teenage girls may be made more vulnerable to pregnancy via a lack of enabling environment for learning at home in the context of household poverty, lack of stimulation at school (both academic and non-academic), poor relationships between educators and learners, poor learning outcomes and high repetition rates (Meny-Gibert and Russell, forthcoming). It is likely that a similar set of processes see young men lose interest in their schooling. Academic achievement and what sociologists of education have referred to as 'school attachment' see a substantial reduction in the risk of teenage pregnancy (see Panday et al, 2009).

Once learners have made it through to the final year of school, the National Senior Certificate (NSC) remains an insurmountable challenge for many learners, with just under a third having failed the NSC in 2011 (Department of Basic Education, 2012). Van der Berg et al (2011) suggest that, "Low-quality education combined with high and lenient grade progression up until Grade 11 means when a standardised assessment occurs, i.e. the Matric examination, this serves to filter a large proportion of weak students out of further attainment."

While low completion rates of senior secondary education, as well as the level of inefficiency of patterns of enrolment, are driven by a complex set of social, institutional and economics variables, I have suggested that the poor quality of education provided in many schools is a major, if not primary, driver. I have shown how both poor learning outcomes and poor feedback mechanism in schools affect these patterns. For the majority of learners who

move through the schooling system, attendance results neither in a meaningful education¹⁴ nor in a recognised qualification.

Matric or bust? Medium terms policy proposals

The evidence outlined above implies that policy and programmatic interventions aimed at increasing enrolment in, and completion of, Grade 12 have to be based on the inextricable link between education quality and educational attainment. Increased senior secondary completion rates are fundamentally about need for better learning outcomes, and linked to this, about youth's sense of achievement and engagement in their education.¹⁵

This requires policy responses aimed at improving learning outcomes earlier in the education system (now receiving more, though arguably still insufficient, attention from the national and provincial departments of education).¹⁶ Improvements in senior secondary education completion, and thus also improved NSC pass rates, are likely to take a long time to effect. This is what the public's demands for year-on-year improvements in the NSC pass rates do not take into account. Given the context outlined above, an increased public focus on indicators of learning outcomes earlier on in the curriculum would be appropriate (such as the recently introduced Annual National Assessments in grades 3, 6 and 9).

¹⁴The very poor learning outcomes of children and youth attending the average South African school is now well documented. See, for example, van der Berg et al, 2011, Taylor, 2011, the 2008/9 edition of Child Gauge (Children's Institute, 2009), and van der Berg, 2006.

¹⁵ Improved education quality is not the only factor in deepening learners sense of school attachment, as I have argued elsewhere (Strassburg et al, 2010) but I suggest that it is central to reducing drop out and is deeply implicated in learners disengagement from their education.

¹⁶See for example the introduction of specific policies since 1995 on early childhood development in the areas of education and social development (Department of Basic Education, 2010), the phased in introduction of compulsory Grade R (a reception year before grade 1) for all children, and the annual national assessments starting in Grade 3.

Given these current inefficiencies and their likely persistence in the short term¹⁷, it is reasonable to question whether it is an appropriate goal to incentivise as many learners to enrol in FET education as possible, to the extent that it detracts from other possible policy options aimed at improving the skills and employability of young South Africans.

The Gauteng Department of Education's strategic plan (2009/10 to 2014/15), for example, notes that the Department "is in support of the international drive to make the first 12 years of schooling compulsory and encourage every learner to attain a senior secondary certificate." (Gauteng Department of Education, 2009). They do not provide a rationale for this goal. Apart from the fact that this does not address the primary drivers of drop out outlined above, it makes the implicit assumption that it is an appropriate societal goal in the South African context, for all learners to strive to complete a senior secondary education. This is the assumption implicit in much of the public discussion about the NSC.

The White Paper of 1995 (Department of Education) outlined a vision of a compulsory general education ending in Grade 9 and a further education and training phase comprising three more years of academic schooling, "general and career specific" training in colleges, or work place training.¹⁸ Implicit in the fact that FET education is not compulsory is that learners can choose to exit schooling and enter the labour market after completion of Grade 9. Thus, the White Paper also mooted a General Education Certificate. Yet over the last fifteen or so years, the GET phase has generally been viewed in both public discussion and policy discussion¹⁹ as the first phase and incomplete stage of a fuller pre-tertiary education (with a far greater social status attached to continuing in school rather than college).

¹⁷Gustafsson and Bartlett show that while grade 9 completion is gradually increasing, the percentage of those who complete Matric has remained constant at about 50%. (Gustafsson and Bartlett, 2008).

¹⁸ The White Paper refers to a number of "modes" through which further education and training can be acquired including "general and career-specific programmes offered in the college sector including those offered in the current Technical Colleges, Community Colleges, Intermediate Tertiary Colleges, other private vocational or academic colleges, and NGO providers" and "programmes offered in Regional Training Centres, through workplace training..." (Department of Education, 1995).

¹⁹ The idea of a GET certificate was explored again briefly in 2008. See Gustafsson and Bartlett, 2008.

This is no doubt is driven by a host of factors, including international trends towards increasing proportions of the population completing a senior secondary education (or equivalent levels of training in technical or vocational institutions), perceptions about the relationship between a more qualified population and economic growth, as well as the acute skills crisis in South Africa. Equity considerations may also be important: at the end of apartheid the gap between the percentage of black and white youths aged 25-29 who had completed a Grade 12 education was stark, at 23% for black youth versus 80% for white youth.²⁰

In addition, there is clear evidence of the gains to individuals and households in obtaining a Matric, in terms of better employment prospects and increased income. Until Grade 12 an additional year of schooling does not increase the chances of employment. On completion of Matric however, employment prospects increase dramatically (Gustafsson, 2011). Wages do increase with additional years of schooling, but more steeply after completion of the NSC (Gustafsson, 2011).

Van der Berg et al (2011) as well as Gustafsson (2011) have suggested that one of the reasons for the returns on Matric in terms of employment and income is that Matric acts as a signal in the labour market of a level of competency attained by learners which employers are unable to discern in the lower grades:

The flatness of both the likelihood of employment and wage increases up to Grade 11 indicates that employers do not regard grade progression as a credible signal of quality and productivity of a job applicant....At 12 years of education there is a dramatic rise in the likelihood of employment. According to this explanation, Matric is a threshold because the labour market considers this standardised and externally monitored national exam to be a credible signal of quality and productivity. (Van der Berg *et al*, 2011).

Further employers “appear uncertain about the cognitive skills associated with different grade attainment levels.” (Van der Berg et al 2011). In light of both this evidence, as well as the unlikely changes to patterns of Matric completion in the short to medium term, we may need to return to the

²⁰National Income Dynamics Survey data, 2008 (de Vos, 2011).

question of whether to introduce a GET certificate. This will involve a number of difficult questions, including whether the certificate should be externally assessed and examined, and if so, do the budgetary costs justify the intervention?

Most countries do have some form of general education certificate at roughly the same stage in the curriculum as Grade 9 (Gustafsson and Bartlett, 2008). The introduction of a General Education Certificate may send a signal to both learners and employers that GET is not simply a necessary stepping stone to a senior secondary education, but that it is a legitimate point to exit the education system. It appears to be unclear as to whether the introduction of this certificate would have an impact on unemployment. Gustafsson and Bartlett have suggested that while it would not necessarily create new jobs it may “increase the efficiency” of how employers and job seekers without a Matric “transact with each other” (Gustafsson and Bartlett, 2008) i.e. that it may take less time to secure work.

The certificate is therefore no panacea to youth unemployment. However, it may have other benefits. It may well incentivise greater enrolment in FET colleges and other forms of vocational and occupation specific training (a goal now very clearly articulated by the Department of Higher Education)²¹ in making the break between GET and FET in school education more distinct and opening up the possibility of not continuing “as usual” in school education.

Conclusion

This essay has explored aspects of the devastating consequences of the poor quality of education provided in many South African schools – including its impact on school completion and the slow progress towards completion for many learners – showing how school quality and “access” (participation) are inextricably linked.

I have suggested possible medium term policy interventions in the form of a GET certificate. This does not imply that we should not look at ways to improve the number of learners who reach Grade 12. There is an urgent need, for example, to give more attention to ways of incentivising and supporting young mothers to return to school (currently, about a third of

²¹ See for example the DHET’s Green Paper on Post-School Education, 2012.

teenage mothers in South Africa return (Panday et. al. 2009)). Extra-curricular activities such as sport may be severely underexplored opportunities to increase school attachment amongst in-school youth. In addition, there may be additional ways to decrease poverty as a barrier to senior secondary completion. I have suggested elsewhere that there are likely to be limited returns to expanding no-fees schools and other interventions that focus simply on the financial cost of schooling. To the extent that poverty causes drop-out, evidence from the Social-Surveys CALS study (2007) suggests the direct cost of schooling is no longer the driver, rather it is the broader financial and social pressures experienced by poor learners and households that leads to drop out (see Strassburg et al, 2010) as well as the impact of 'relative poverty' (see Dieltiens and Meny-Gibert, forthcoming).

The primary driver of low completion rates, however, is poor learning outcomes earlier on in the school system, and it is here that the greatest focus is needed.

South Africa's senior secondary completion rates are low by developed and middle income country standards. In Thailand the figure is 50%, in USA 77% and the UK, 87% (Gustafsson et al, 2011). Completion rates of tertiary education are comparatively even lower, with still stark (though decreasing) differences by race and socio-economic status. These realities undoubtedly do have an impact on economic growth, unemployment and on persistent inequality. Cross-country data analyses have shown the clear correlation between education and economic growth. However, more recent data has suggested that years of schooling plays a small role relative to learner performance (Gustafsson and Bartlett, 2008). In the race to improve the number of youth sitting for Matric we miss the point that to the extent that the poor skills base of South Africans contributes to unemployment and constrains economic growth (the South African economy's low labour absorption capacity may be more profoundly shaped by other variables) it is less the qualification levels of our population that is implicated and more the learning outcomes the education system produces – with particularly devastating consequences for race and class inequality.

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