

School drop-out: Poverty and patterns of exclusion

Veerle Dieltiens (Education Policy Unit, University of the Witwatersrand) and Sarah Meny-Gibert (Social Surveys Africa)

Poverty is often cited as an important reason for why learners drop out of school. It is taken for granted that the costs of school fees, uniforms, transport and stationery, and the loss of child labour, strain limited household resources to push children out of school. But this explanation does not necessarily hold true in South Africa, where most children enrol in school despite high levels of poverty. Although 70% of children lived in poverty in 2006,¹ South Africa had a high gross enrolment rate (according to the Department of Education) — 96% for grades R – 9 and 86% for grades 10 – 12 in 2006.

Absolute poverty, therefore, cannot on its own explain drop-out. Poverty matters, but not in the way it has commonly been understood in relation to access to education. What is needed is an expanded, more nuanced definition of poverty, rather than a simple equation between drop-out and absolute poverty.

This essay examines how a multi-dimensional model of poverty helps account for the impact of poverty on children's school attendance at different stages of their school careers:

- In what ways does absolute poverty affect children's school attendance?
- How does relative poverty account for school drop-out during grades R – 9?
- How does poor quality education become a cause of drop-out after grade 9?

The essay draws on the findings of the Barriers to Education Project, a joint initiative between Social Surveys Africa and the Centre for Applied Legal Studies at the University of Witwatersrand. The study combined quantitative and qualitative research, including a national survey of over 4,400 households across South Africa, and focus group discussions with caregivers, youth and educators in Limpopo and Gauteng, which provided rich data on the complex reasons for school drop-out in these communities. This essay draws on data from the qualitative component of the study.

In what ways does absolute poverty affect children's school attendance?

Absolute poverty refers to a minimum standard of goods and services needed to meet basic needs and sustain subsistence. People falling under some absolute standard — such as the Millennium Development Goals declaration of “a dollar a day” — can be classified as poor. Absolute poverty (the inability to afford the direct costs of schooling) is often used in international documents to explain limited access to schools. For example, Kattan describes a dramatic increase in enrolment when costs such as school fees were reduced or eliminated in Kenya in 2004.

In South Africa school fees have been singled out as a particularly burdensome cost, and organisations such as the Education Rights Project at the University of the Witwatersrand have been campaigning for their complete abolition. Fleisch and Woolman have argued that absolute or ‘abject’ poverty inhibits access to education because the full range of costs associated with attendance, particularly uniforms and transport, are unaffordable for households.

In theory, fees should not be keeping children out of school since the introduction of the school-fee exemption policy and no-fee schools. These determine that children attending the poorest schools in South Africa do not have to pay fees and poor children attending fee-paying schools can apply for a full or partial fee exemption. Yet, in practice, most caregivers who participated in the Barriers to Education focus groups were unaware that their children could not be punished or turned away from school for non-payment of fees, or for not having the correct school uniform. Most indicated that they were struggling or unable to pay school fees. Therefore, the issue is less about poverty and more about schools' non-adherence to policy, as well as the school-funding system, which creates incentives for schools to exclude poor learners. (See the essay on *Addressing quality through school fees and school funding* on pp. 35 – 40.)

Despite the burden of poverty on so many South African households, the vast majority of children stay in school. Rather

¹ This poverty line is set at R350 per person per month (in 2000 prices), and increased each year in line with inflation. See pp. 77 in the *Children Count - The Numbers* section for a detailed discussion of this poverty line and related data.

than causing drop-out, absolute poverty may in fact draw children into school and keep them there longer. Schools offer poor households additional resources in the form of child care, some basic access to nutrition and hope for a better future. High adult unemployment and legislation preventing child labour mean there is little opportunity for children to engage in income-generating activities outside of school.

Absolute poverty may prolong a child's journey through school as a result of repetition. Hallman and Grant, reporting on a study in KwaZulu-Natal in 2004, found that poor children are more likely to experience "school delays".

Children living in absolute poverty have the odds stacked against them and may be more vulnerable to failure. A learner from Thembelihle in Limpopo explained:

You can't study at night because sometimes your mother does not have money to buy enough paraffin for you to study 'til late and sometimes when you are using the candle it burns out before you complete studying.

The essay now turns to a broader conceptualisation of poverty that may explain why children drop out of school in the basic education phase.

How does relative poverty account for school drop-out during grades R – 9?

Recent attempts at conceptualising poverty have looked beyond absolute poverty to an understanding of the way that poverty is measured or experienced in relation to others. The concept of 'relative poverty' was developed in response to the acknowledgement that poverty is always, to some extent, a relative concept. A person is generally judged to be poor in comparison to the people around him or her. Unlike absolute poverty, which focuses on basic survival, relative poverty focuses on inequalities within society.

In terms of access to education, relative poverty is concerned with children's experience of poverty, its inequitable outcomes and the processes that lead to exclusion. The concept of relative poverty helps focus the attention on the phenomenological experience of poverty: It puts the lived experience of poverty at centre stage.

Case 5 illustrates how poverty bites hardest in relation to other people. It suggests that children are less likely to drop out of school when they are equally poor than when there is a greater socio-economic mix.

Case 5: The effects of relative poverty

Doreen is a small rural village in Limpopo, just south of the Zimbabwean border, surrounded by commercial farmland. Most households subsist on social grants and the meagre income from farm labour. Children from Doreen and the surrounding area attend farm schools or leave home to attend school in the nearby town of Musina, which few families can afford. The two farm schools do not offer education beyond grades 7 and 9 respectively. All households in the village are very poor. They struggle to pay for uniforms and stationary, and many simply don't pay – but the children remain in school until grade 9.

The communities of Phagameng and Thembelihle tell a different story. Phagameng is a township adjacent to the town of Modimolle in Limpopo. Whilst almost all the children attending the Phagameng township school are from low income households, there is a greater socio-economic mix of learners than in Doreen. And it is this difference, however small, that is key.

Children from the local informal settlement in Phagameng were singled out by other learners for being poor and "dirty". A girl attending the Phagameng high school explained how she was embarrassed to be seen with pap in her lunch box, when other children had "nice things" like cheese and bread. She was so embarrassed that she chose to walk home to have lunch during break time.

In the informal settlement of Thembelihle most children attend school in the suburbs of Lenasia. Thembelihle learners and caregivers spoke of their feelings of disempowerment and inadequacy in relation to the wealthier learners and parents. When asked what concerns young people in her community, a young woman from Thembelihle said:

I think it is the issues of houses and electricity in the house because you feel like you don't exist when your classmates start to talk about how their mothers cooked, using the microwave. You feel small because if we had electricity we wouldn't be using paraffin stoves or lamps or candles ...

A learner in Thembelihle, who attended a high school in Lenasia before dropping out of school, explained:

... like when you are in a big family and the mother can't give everyone the attention they need. She only concentrates on the youngest ones and forgets about you, and if you ask her for something regarding your school she won't give it to you ... When you get to school you see that other children have everything and you are the only one who does not have a thing so you end up dropping out of school because you feel like you are the odd one out. Then your mother starts calling you names because you dropped out.

Source: Centre for Applied Legal Studies & Social Surveys Africa (2007) *Formative Research Report. Barriers to Education Project, June 2007*. Unpublished.



The reasons for school drop-out are complex, as the case shows. A child's 'decision' to drop out of school is seldom related to one clear factor, but to a complex interplay of social and economic factors. Feelings of inferiority and needing to fit in with the peer group may cause stress and anxiety, which affect participation in class or attendance at school. Feelings of inferiority may be especially pronounced for learners from informal settlements attending former Model C schools, or rural children who are sent to urban township schools in the interests of gaining a better education. In case 5, fees and access costs were not identified as the problem — it was the daily burden of poverty and the feeling of being poor in relation to those around them that pushed children out of school.

Focusing on relative poverty in addition to absolute poverty highlights the lived experience of the child at school. It urges us to focus on the child's experience of poverty in relation to others, and the processes through which the child is excluded from school, rather than the absolute costs of education.

A puzzle still remains. Relative poverty may be experienced throughout children's school career, so what causes the sudden increase in school drop-out after the end of compulsory schooling in grade 9?

How does poor quality education become a cause of drop-out after grade 9?

Noble, Wright and Cluver emphasise a multi-dimensional model of poverty which includes both absolute and relative measures, and includes, as indicators of poverty, opportunities to access good quality services and a person's ability to participate fully in society.

In South Africa most learners do not have access to good quality education. We argue that the primary reason for drop-out in the post-compulsory phase of schooling is the poor quality of education received by learners in South Africa.

International and national benchmark tests demonstrate that learners are failing to achieve literacy and numeracy outcomes. The Department of Education's grade 3 and grade 6 systemic evaluations show dismal results. In the grade 6 tests in 2005 learners obtained a national mean score of 38% in the language of learning and teaching, 27% in mathematics, and 41% in natural sciences.

Some learners from Phagameng, Thembelihle and Diepkloof Extension (Gauteng) appeared disinterested in and alienated from their schooling and felt that they have no positive future to look forward to. A Phagameng parent commented:

... teachers in our schools don't teach our children and they don't care about our children's future. Our children don't feel free to go to school because of the bad things that happen in our community. The teachers from the schools in town teach the children and they care about their future and the schools are strict so everything is done properly.

Some young people simply didn't see the value of education. Phagameng learners pointed out that even those learners who obtained distinctions in matric were not finding work. This left learners feeling discouraged and demotivated.

If learners are realising that their education has no value, it may explain their reluctance to continue beyond compulsory schooling in grade 9. Boredom, high unemployment or economic 'opportunities' outside of school in the form of crime may leave learners feeling that there is little value in

pushing through. Pressure on schools to perform in the matric exams may cause them to push out learners who are weak and unlikely to succeed, or learners may themselves recognise that they are not coping with classroom content.

Amartya Sen's capabilities approach reminds us that the goal of development programmes or policies is not simply to alleviate absolute poverty but to enable all people to develop their "capabilities". Sen defines human capabilities as being "the substantive freedom of people to lead the lives they have reason to value and enhance the real choices they have". A good education is a basic capability. It equips learners with the knowledge and skills to use their material possessions, innate talents and environment to make real choices, and to lead a full life. Lack of access to quality education is an indicator of poverty.

In South Africa, many learners are clearly not able to translate educational inputs into capabilities. Sen's capability approach to development highlights the link between the quality of an education system and the continued enrolment in that system by youth. Even if learners have resources and equality, they may still drop out because their education is of no use to them, or is not valued.

What are the conclusions?

There is a need for a more complex and nuanced understanding of the relationship between poverty and school drop-out. Absolute poverty cannot account for drop-out on its own because so many poor learners continue to stay in school. Yet it may account for delayed entry into school and high repetition rates. Relative poverty shows how inequalities between learners may make learners more vulnerable to drop out, while Sen's capabilities approach highlights poor quality education as a primary driver of school drop-out.

Whilst the results of the Barrier to Education Project need to be tested more extensively, the implications for policy are sobering. If children are more likely to stay in schools and communities where all children are poor, then what implications does this have for breaking class and socio-economic boundaries?

If poverty is felt in a relative way, then a simple concentration on fees and other access costs will not have a major impact on school drop-out. Instead, the solution may lie in understanding the processes by which children and parents become excluded. Resources should be directed into providing better support mechanisms for poorer learners and to engender a human rights culture in schools.

Furthermore, interventions to increase access beyond basic education need to recognise the link between access and quality. Meaningful access to education extends far

beyond physical access and school attendance. It includes learners making cognitive progress and attaining curricula outcomes. Focusing resources on quality is not at the expense of access issues — it directly begins to address them.

Sources

Centre for Applied Legal Studies & Social Surveys Africa (2007) *Formative Research Report*. Barriers to Education Project, June 2007. Unpublished.

Department of Education (2005) *Grade 6 Systemic Evaluation Report*. Pretoria: DoE.

Department of Education (2005) *Monitoring and Evaluation Report on the Impact and Outcomes of the Education System on South Africa's Population: evidence from household surveys*. Pretoria: DoE.

Department of Education (2003) *Grade 3 Systemic Evaluation Report*. Pretoria: DoE.

Fleisch B & Woolman S (2004) On the constitutionality of school fees: A reply to Roithmayr. *Perspectives in Education*, 22(1): 111-123.

Hallman K & Grant M (2004) Poverty, educational attainment, and livelihoods: How well do young people fare in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa? *Horizon Research Summary*. Washington, USA: Population Council.

Kattan RB (2006) *Implementation of free basic education policy*. Education Working Paper Series No. 7. Washington, USA: The World Bank.

Noble M, Wright G & Cluver L (2007) Conceptualising, defining and measuring child poverty in South Africa: an argument for a multidimensional approach. In: Dawes A, Bray R, Van der Merwe A (eds) *Monitoring Child Well-Being: A South African rights-based approach*. Cape Town: HSRC Press, pp. 53-71.

Sen, A (1999) *Development as Freedom*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.