

Access to Education

2

Left unfinished

Temporary absence
and drop-out from
South African schools

Sabine Strassburg,
Sarah Meny-Gibert
and Bev Russell



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Findings from the Access to Education Study
Volume 2

November 2010



CALS
Centre for Applied
Legal Studies

This publication is the outcome of a major research project entitled Access to Education in South Africa, jointly undertaken by Social Surveys and the Centre for Applied Legal Studies (CALS) of the University of the Witwatersrand.

The research team was led by Bev Russell, director of Social Surveys. Sarah Meny-Gibert was the senior researcher in charge of the study. Riaan Mostert and Lesley Parenzee helped to analyse the data. Irma Grundling drew the sample, and weighted the data. Jennifer Shindler computed gross and net enrolment rates. Janey See and Riaan Mostert helped to clean the data, and Ndinda Makina provided data management support.

Field work was managed by Khathu Mathavha and Dale Howell. Dale Howell managed the team of coders, capturers and quality controllers, comprising Elizabeth Manley, Katlego Skosana, Nqulelwa Xhosa, Sandile Zwane, Mpho Mchaza, Marijke Smith and Amanda Mitchell.

Sabine Strassburg co-ordinated the dissemination of research results over the past year, with support from Sarah Meny-Gibert.

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The photographs in this volume were taken by Khathu Mathavha, field manager, at Phagameng and Modimolle in Limpopo, one of the sites of the qualitative research undertaken for this study.

Contents

Preface	4
Acknowledgements	5
Abbreviations	5
SECTION ONE About this study	9
The scope of the study	11
Research process and method	12
SECTION TWO A quick overview of enrolment	15
SECTION THREE Levels and causes of temporary absence	19
Absence from school	19
Who is missing school, and why?	21
Absence from school for a year or more	24
SECTION FOUR Who is out of school, and why?	29
Children of compulsory schoolgoing age	30
Conclusion	42
Endnotes	44
Bibliography	47
Appendix 1: Reference group	51
Appendix 2: Survey field workers	52

Preface

Left Unfinished is the second in a series of three publications which present key findings from the Access to Education study undertaken by Social Surveys and the Centre for Applied Legal Studies (CALs) from late 2006 to 2009.

The purpose of the study, previously known as Barriers to Education, was to collect data on the access of children and youths to South African schools, and identify factors preventing them from attending school and completing their school education. The findings are based on a nationally representative household survey as well as qualitative research in urban and rural areas.

Left Unfinished focuses on the temporary and permanent absence from school of children and youths aged seven to 18, profiles out-of-school youths, and explores why they are not in school.

Volume 1, *Treading Water*, provides an overview of enrolment and completion patterns in South African schools. It then takes a closer look at the extent, causes, and impact of schooling delays, with a particular focus on the repetition of school grades.

Volume 3, *More than Getting through the School Gates*, conveys the findings of our survey of youths aged 16 to 18, and our qualitative research among youths, caregivers and educators. It provides a textured picture of the daily experiences of youths and the barriers to their meaningful participation in schooling (with a particular focus on the impact of poverty).

Each publication can be read on its own; however, the series is intended to provide a comprehensive picture of access to schooling in South Africa.

A detailed technical report on the national household survey is available from Social Surveys, and can be downloaded from www.socialsurveys.co.za.

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- Jennifer Shindler, who calculated the gross and net enrolment ratios from the survey data and also provided valuable insights and advice;
- Yusuf Sayed and Brahm Fleisch, for their constructive input; and
- Our field team, whose names are listed in Appendix Two.

Abbreviations

ASER	Age-specific Enrolment Ratio
EMIS	Education Management Information System
FET	Further Education and Training
GER	Gross Enrolment Ratio
GHS	General Household Survey (Department of Statistics)
NSC	National Senior Certificate
NER	Net Enrolment Ratio
SACMEQ	Southern African Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality
SES	Socio-economic Status



About this study

South Africa's post-apartheid constitution enshrines the right to basic and further education. In line with this, the Schools Act of 1996 introduced compulsory schooling for all children aged seven to 15. It stated that public schools should admit learners and serve their educational requirements without any form of 'unfair discrimination'; and that no learners should be refused admission to a public school on the grounds that their parents had not paid or were unable to pay school fees.

From 2003 onwards, CALS assisted parents in the settlement of Thembelihle where some children were being barred from accessing schools due to their inability to pay school fees or registration fees. As a result, CALS and Social Surveys launched a major research project, entitled *Barriers to Education*, aimed at establishing the extent of this problem in South African schools, and identifying any other factors barring the access of children or youths to education which could similarly be regarded as 'unfair discrimination'.

In 2007, shortly after the project began, the government introduced no-fee schools in poorer areas (see Box 1). As a result of this important change, and the findings of the qualitative and pilot research conducted by Social Surveys, the scope of the study was broadened to include any factors affecting learners' access to schooling.

Meaningful access to education requires more than just 'getting through the school gates.' Access was therefore defined as the ability to participate meaningfully in school education, and data was collected on a range of factors which allow or prevent this. The conceptual framework for this approach is summarised in Table 1.

Box 1: No-fee schools and fee exemptions

Government schools in South Africa are grouped into one of five quintiles. Based on the assumption that a school primarily serves the children in the community surrounding it, the classification is done on the basis of the socio-economic status of the surrounding community.

Quintile 1 schools are the poorest, and Quintile 5 schools the wealthiest (former Model C schools fall into this quintile). Quintile 1 schools receive progressively more funding per learner for non-personnel, non-capital expenditure than those in the higher quintiles.

In 2007, all Quintile 1 and Quintile 2 schools were made 'no-fee' schools, which meant that learners no longer had to pay school fees. Learners attending schools in the upper three quintiles who cannot afford the fees could apply for a partial or full exemption.¹

In 2010, the no-fee school policy was extended to Quintile 3 schools. This means that parents of learners attending some 60 per cent of state schools in South Africa are exempted from paying fees.

The quintile system has been criticised, and is being reviewed by the Department of Basic Education.²

Table 1: Dimensions of access to education researched in this study

BASIC ACCESS	Attendance: enrolment in and attendance at school
	Enrolment and progression at the appropriate age
	Consistent attendance (conversely: absenteeism)
	Contractual access: school adherence to regulations which enable access for children
'ENABLING' ACCESS	Access to physical and human resources in schools
	Freedom from exposure to a range of harmful behaviours (bullying, sexual abuse etc) in schools

The annual General Household Survey (GHS) undertaken by Statistics South Africa showed high levels of enrolment for children and youths of compulsory schoolgoing age (seven to 15), but other surveys also pointed to low levels of school completion,³ high levels of grade repetition, and high levels of prolonged absence from school.⁴ Building a profile of children and youths who experience these delays or barriers to school completion became a key focus of our research.

Box 2: The South African schooling system

The South African education system is divided into three bands:

General Education and Training (GET), or Basic Education, comprises Grades R to 9. This band is further divided into three phases, namely the Foundation Phase (Grades 1 to 3), Intermediate Phase (Grades 4 to 6), and Senior Phase (Grades 7 to 9).

Further Education and Training (FET) comprises Grades 10 to 12 (and equivalent levels in FET colleges).

Higher education comprises courses at tertiary institutions, including universities and colleges.

Children have to attend school until they have completed their Basic Education or until they turn 16 (whichever comes first).

Children 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.⁵

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).

The scope of the study

In terms of the South African Schools Act, children have to attend school from the first day of the school year in which they turn seven until the last day of the school year in which they turn 15, or the end of Grade 9, whichever comes first.⁶ Should a child move through the school system without repeating or missing school for substantial periods of time, he or she will be 17 or 18 when they matriculate. It was partly for this reason that the Access to Education household survey focused on the seven to 18-year age group. Collecting additional data on older youths out of school would have been desirable, but budget and time constraints had to be taken into account.

The survey captured data on all learners in school (irrespective of age), as well as children and youths out of school aged five to 18 years. Data was collected for those attending (or having left) public or private schools, including ordinary schools, Further Education and Training (FET) colleges, and schools catering for learners with special needs. Additional qualitative research was conducted on youths from age 16 to their early twenties.

Research process and method

Key stakeholders in education were consulted throughout the project. A reference group was established comprising representatives of the Department of Basic Education, educationalists, child rights specialists, and experts on research methods (see Appendix 1).

Research began in late 2006 with a comprehensive literature review. Qualitative research was conducted in 2007 comprising focus group discussions with caregivers, youths, and educators in a range of formal and informal settlements in Gauteng and Limpopo.

The household survey⁷ was conducted from late October to the first week in December 2007, and the booster survey in early 2008. Comprising 4 498 households throughout the country, the sample was both nationally and provincially representative. Data was weighted up to the national population.

In early 2010, given the findings of the household survey, Social Surveys conducted additional qualitative research on over-aged learners and their impact on their edu-

Box 3: The sample frame

Statistics South Africa classifies all enumerator areas in the country into settlement types (such as formal settlements, informal settlements, and so on). This is done on the basis of their geographic location and the kinds of dwellings most common in the area in question. Enumerator areas are then aggregated into sub-places. We used the sub-place classification of the 2001 census as the basis for our sampling frame.

Our sample was drawn from formal sub-places, informal sub-places, farm sub-places, small-holding sub-places,⁸ and traditional sub-places (described as 'tribal areas' in the census). Other settlement types – including industrial areas and recreational areas, such as holiday resorts – were not considered relevant for a household survey.

Farm sub-places are essentially commercial farms. Households in in this category were randomly selected, and included those of farmers, farm labourers, and other people living on farms.

Traditional areas are communal areas governed by traditional authorities. They are predominantly rural, and largely correspond to the former homelands.

Informal sub-places are settlements largely comprising informal dwellings, ie, shacks.

Formal sub-places are structured settlements which are provided with municipal services, and on which primarily formal dwellings are located. This category is very broad as it ranges from formal townships to middle-income suburbs in towns and cities.

cators and younger peers. In-depth interviews and focus discussions were held with learners, educators, and younger peers in the township of Bekkersdal on the West Rand in Gauteng, and the rural villages of Mamaila Molototsi and Bellevue in Limpopo.

The main person we interviewed in every household was the primary caregiver, defined as the person most closely involved in the education of the children in the household. Youths aged 16 to 18 were interviewed on the basis of a separate questionnaire (which we refer to as the youth survey). This data was not weighted to the national population.

The study and questionnaires were approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of the Witwatersrand.⁹ Respondents (both caregivers and youths) consented in writing before being interviewed.





A quick overview of enrolment

Encouragingly, according to our household survey, only 1,2 per cent of children and youths of compulsory schoolgoing age (seven to 15) were not in school in 2007. However, this proportion rose to 10 per cent for youths aged 16 to 18 – the age range specified in the age-grade norms for Grades 10 to 12.

Table 2: Age-specific enrolment rates, 2007

Age cohort	% of population in school	% of population out of school	% of population that has completed matric/ diploma	TOTAL
7 to 15 years	98.8%	1.2%	–	100%
16 to 18 years	87.8%	9.8%	2.4%	100%
7 to 18 years	96.1%	3.4%	0.5%	100%
7 to 15: n=6556; 16 to 18: n=2204.				
Source: Household Survey, Access to Education, 2007.				

Age-specific enrolment rates dropped more steeply after age 15, with 20 per cent of 18-year-olds out of school and not having completed their matric. As noted in Volume 1, *Treading Water*, levels of completion of the full school curriculum were low, with an ‘achieved’ completion rate for Grade 12 of only 44 per cent.¹⁰ Learners drop out primarily in the FET band.¹¹ They may persevere with their education into their early twenties (after having repeated grades or missing periods of schooling), and still drop out before completing matric.

Table 3: Age-specific enrolment rates, 2007

Age	7	8	9	10	11	12
% out of school	2.9%	1.0%	0.6%	0.5%	0.5%	0.7%
% in school	97.1%	99.0%	99.4%	99.5%	99.5%	99.3%
TOTAL	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	0%
Age	13	14	15	16	17	18
% out of school	0.5%	1.4%	2.9%	5.2%	11.4%	13.5%
% in school	99.5%	98.6%	97.1%	94.5%	87.8%	79.5%
% with matric/ diploma	0%	0%	0%	0.3%	0.8%	7.0%
TOTAL	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

n=8760.
Source: Household Survey, Access to Education, 2007.

Less than 1 per cent of children and youths aged seven to 18 recorded in our household survey had never attended school. Nearly half of those (47,5 per cent) were seven or eight, and therefore likely to enrol over the next few years.

Box 4: Comparing enrolment figures

Our figures on the proportion of children attending school are generally supported by previous household survey findings, though Community Survey results for the 16-to-18 age group were 8 per cent lower than those from the Access to Education survey.

Table 4: Comparison of enrolment rates from different household surveys, 2007

Age cohorts	Access to Education Survey	General Household Survey ¹²	Community Survey ¹³
7 to 15 years	98,8%	98%	95,4%
16 to 18 years	87,8%	85%	80%

Box 5: Over-aged learners in South African schools

According to our household survey, almost every second Grade 12 learner was older than 18, and 22 per cent of Grade 12 learners were older than 20.

The main reason for the presence of over-aged learners in schools is the repetition of grades – a major feature of our schooling system.

Levels of attendance beyond the age of 18 was particularly high in Limpopo. One of the reasons for this is the high repetition rates in that province. According to Stats SA, over 80 per cent of Limpopo's population live in traditional areas and our data shows that children and youths living in such areas are more vulnerable to repetition. We explore repetition and other delays in learners' progression in Volume 1, *Treading Water*.





Levels and causes of temporary absence

This section focuses on the levels and causes of temporary absence from school among learners in Grades 1 to 12. First we explore the levels and causes of absence from school in 2007 recorded in our household survey. The findings suggest that levels of absenteeism are not high enough to have a major affect on learning outcomes and broader social participation in school. This has also been suggested by other studies, including research commissioned by the Department of Basic Education in 2008,¹⁴ as well as other household surveys.¹⁵ However, data on school absenteeism may be under-reported.¹⁶ Our youth survey indicates that ‘bunking’ classes for part of a school day is more common than truancy or absence for any other reason for a full day.

We then turn to temporary drop-out from school, focusing on learners who have missed a year or more of schooling at some point in their school career and returned to school.

Absence from school

How many learners were absent, and for how long?

Caregivers were asked to specify how many full days of schooling children or youths in their care had missed in 2007.¹⁷ Eighty-six per cent of learners had been absent for at least one full day as a result of the educators’ strike. Apart from this, most children (86 per cent) had not been absent at all, or had missed school for no longer than five days. Only 14 per cent had been absent for more than five days, and 5 per cent for more than ten days. The Labour Force Survey of 2006 found that 8 per cent of learners had been absent from school for more than five days.¹⁸

Table 4: Absence from school, 2007

Days absent	Percentage of learners
None	44.5%
1 to 5 days	41.5%
6 to 10 days	9.0%
11 to 20 days	2.9%
21 to 30 days	1.3%
More than 30 days	0.8%

n=9230. Source: Household Survey, Access to Education, 2007.

Caregivers were also asked to specify the longest continuous period of absence from school of children or youths in their care during 2007. According to caregivers, 9 per cent of learners who had been absent had missed more than five days of school at a time, and 4 per cent more than 10 days at a time.¹⁹

Box 6: Learners who miss school for more than ten days at a time

Absence for long stretches of time is most likely to occur in the context of household poverty (except for some cases of illness or injury).

Our findings suggest that learners who routinely suffer from hunger are more likely to be absent from school for more than ten days at a time than others. However, neither socio-economic status (as measured on our index) nor household income emerged as significant variables.

Interestingly, we found that male and female learners are equally likely to be absent for more than ten days at a time.

Children and youths living in informal settlements are more likely to be out of school for more than ten days at a time (7 per cent of total) than those living in formal (small and larger urban) settlements (3 per cent) and traditional areas (3 per cent), with learners living on commercial farms (12 per cent) the most vulnerable to this kind of absence.²⁰

The greater proportion of youths on farms experiencing longer term absence from school may be caused by youth finding temporary casual work on farms.

Who is missing school, and why?

The reasons provided by caregivers for the longest period their children had been absent from school (excluding absence caused by the educators' strike) are shown in Table 6. Illness was by far the most frequent reason (84 per cent).

Given South Africa's inefficient public health care system, learners who attend public health facilities – either to access health care themselves or to help relatives to do so – are more likely to be away from school for longer periods than those accessing private health care.

Table 5: Reason for longest period of absence, 2007²¹

Reason for longest period of absence by learners	Percent of learners
Health/illness: Went to the doctor / sickness or injury/ caregiver wanted child to rest	83.7%
Weather conditions / floods	8.5%
Family responsibilities: Visiting relatives, was out of town/funeral/relative died/looking after family member/child watched livestock/child was working (0.1%)/collecting social grant	6.2%
Institutional/in-school factors: educator was absent/educator victimises learner/assaulted by the educator / educator attending course/exam period/ no feeding scheme that day/had fight with learner/bullied/assaulted by another learner/school opened earlier than expected	5%
Financial/cost of education: financial problems/school fees unpaid/ no soap to wash clothes or to bath/no stationery/no lunch money/clothes: embarrassed/couldn't afford sport's activity/no food at home/no transport money/did not go on a school trip/did not have complete uniform	4.5%
Child/youth did not want to go to school	4.3%
Transport and physical access: Transport unavailable/school is far away	2.5%
Child/youth was running late for school	1.1%
All other responses (affecting less than 1% of children / youths each): Child raped/sexually assaulted/no electricity in community/not safe on the way to school (general safety or crime)/no water in the area/community strike/child suspended/child went to rehab/child involved in crime or arrested/ child late for school/pregnant/had to look after her own baby/schoolwork not done/lost bus ticket/household moved/religious holiday/cultural event/ personal admin (fetched ID or birth certificate)	3.0%
Responses: n=10 311, cases: n=5310. Source: Household Survey, Access to Education, 2007.	

The next most common reason was adverse weather conditions. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this affected children in rural areas (traditional and farming areas) more than those in urban formal and informal settlements.

Box 7: Getting to school

According to our household survey, the vast majority of learners aged seven to 18 (76 per cent) walked to school. This is partly because most learners attended a school in the community in which they lived. Also, 80 per cent of learners attended the school closest to their home.²² This in turn, was influenced by the cost of attending school elsewhere.

The South African National Household Travel Survey of 2005²³ found that 90,6 per cent of rural children walked to school. Our household survey found that while 87,7 per cent of learners living in traditional settlements walked to school, only about half living on commercial farms walked to school, clearly because the distances between their homes and their schools are often far larger. (The relatively low supply of secondary schools in farming areas may also contribute to the high post-GET drop-out rate in farming areas, which will be explored in the next section).

Doreen, one of the sites of our qualitative research on access to education, is a small rural village in Limpopo. Most of the adults in Doreen are unemployed, or underemployed, earning very low wages as casual workers on surrounding commercial farms. Learners can attend one of two farm schools, neither of which offers tuition beyond Grade 9. The closest secondary school is 20 kilometres away. One learner commented:

There is a bus [to school], which is R40 per month, and I don't use it because my parents do not have money.

Many learners from poor households in Doreen therefore have to walk long distances to school, affecting timely and regular attendance, especially during the rainy season. Some very young children walk for over half an hour to get to school. Some children have to cross a river to get to one of the farm schools, and when the river is in flood they do not attend. In some cases, fences prevent them from using short-cuts.

Walking to school can also be hazardous for children and youths in urban areas. A parent in the informal settlement of Thembelihle in Gauteng commented:

Kids ... are forced to cross busy roads where cars are always involved in accidents. ... We have experienced a lot of deaths where our kids are run over.

Some learners also reported that they were afraid of being raped, abducted or robbed. A female learner in Thembelihle explained:

The route that I use to go to school has lots of bushes, and even when you scream people won't be able to hear you.

According to our youth survey, 10 per cent of youths aged 16 to 18 always felt unsafe on their way to school.

Six percent of children experienced their longest period of absence from school as a result of family responsibilities or domestic chores such as looking after a sick relative, and collecting a social grant. A very small proportion of children and youths missed school as a result of 'working' (the form of work was unspecified).

Caregivers were also asked to choose factors that had contributed to their children's absence from school from a prompt card, and then mention any additional factors not listed on the card. Results did not vary substantially from those on the reasons for the longest period of absence, although financial concerns, particularly access costs and fees - featured slightly more prominently (affecting 6,4 per cent of learners).

Children with some form of disability missed more days of schooling than children without a disability.²⁴ Children who went hungry missed more days of schooling than those who did not; however, of those, 87 per cent only missed ten days or less of schooling. Rather than causing higher levels of absence, we believe constant hunger should be seen as an indicator of extreme poverty, which render children more likely to be absent from school. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the government's School Nutrition Programme is boosting attendance by poorer children.²⁵

Learners living on farms missed more days of schooling than those living in traditional, formal, or informal settlements, followed by those living in informal settlements.²⁶

Our data showed very little difference between the levels of absence by learners in primary and secondary schools, as well as between GET and FET. However, youths who participated in our youth survey (ages 16-18) reported slightly higher levels of absence than caregivers for this age group - probably because caregivers are less likely to report on instances of truancy.

Youths were asked whether they ever skipped classes while the other learners were in class. Fourteen percent indicated that they sometimes skipped classes, and 15 per cent of those said they did so daily or weekly. A further 9 per cent indicated that they had skipped classes every month.²⁷ Our qualitative research on access to education suggests that levels of 'bunking' classes may be much higher. The CASE/JET report noted that while members of school governing bodies, principals and education officials did not regard absence for a full day as a problem, partial absence (being absent for less than a day, or coming to school late) was a problem that needed to be addressed.²⁸

Youths who participated in our youth survey said learners skipped classes to spend time socialising with friends, drinking or smoking (either on or off school grounds), or to avoid an educator they did not like or found boring. A few girls in our qualitative research mentioned missing lessons or days of school to avoid an educator they were dating.²⁹

Our qualitative research with educators and caregivers suggest that insufficient adult supervision and parental engagement, as well as disciplinary and communication problems, contribute to absenteeism and 'bunking' classes. Caregivers in poor households may work very long hours, and arrive home late and tired as many do not have control over their working hours or conditions of employment.³⁰ According to research in infor-

mal settlements in Potchefstroom, this affects communication between caregivers and children in poor households, with learners reporting that they seldom discussed their school activities with their parents.³¹

When asked to comment on the reasons for late arrivals, an educator in a school in Lenasia explained:

There's also a situation where the parents leave very early [for work]. So they don't know if the child got up and came to school. There's a child in my class who comes late all the time. When the father came in, he said it's just him and his daughter living there, he goes to work early. So that child who is in grade 3 is expected to get up on time, get breakfast, dress, and get to school on time, which is impossible.³²

Educators interviewed in Lenasia reported that a number of learners lived with their grandparents, because their parents had died, their families had been divided by migration, relations between their parents had broken down, and so on. According to these educators, elderly people found it difficult to retain control over their grandchildren, and ensure that they go to school every day.

However, this is not only a problem in respect of grandparents. In our focus group discussions, many parents expressed frustration about their children's apparent lack of respect, and their inability to discipline their children. Thus a parent in Thembelihle said:

I want to be honest on this issue. Our kids do not respect us. They do not want to listen to us. They know very well that you can't do anything if they do not go to school. They like staying in groups in the area. You can't tell them anything.³³

Absence from school for a year or more

In Volume 1 we briefly reported on learners who had missed a year or more of schooling at some point and returned to school. This affected 4,1 per cent of learners of all ages; 3,6 per cent of learners in the GET band, and 6,4 per cent of learners in the FET band. The proportion of learners substantially older than their peers who had left school temporarily for a year or more was far larger; a quarter of learners three or more years above the age-grade norms in the last phase of schooling had missed a year or more of school.

Which learners missed school for a year or more, and why?

Equal proportions of boys and girls had missed a year or more of schooling. The proportion of black learners were the highest (4,6 per cent), followed by Indian (3 per cent), coloured (2,3 per cent), and white (0,4 per cent) learners.³⁴ Given the small sample size of Indian and white children, these results may not mean that Indian youths are more vulnerable to being absent from school for long periods.

We developed a socio-economic index for households using four indicators included in our household survey, namely access to infrastructure³⁵, living density, the employment status of adult members, and the level of education of the household head.³⁶

The results show that socio-economic status is closely correlated with long periods of absence from school – in other words, that the proportion of children absent from school rises as their households' scores on the socio-economic index worsen, and vice versa.³⁷

Our study suggests that, while children and youths may leave school for a year or more for various reasons (including severe illnesses or injuries), poverty plays a major role in lengthy absences from school.

Our survey did not record the reasons why learners had been absent from school for a year or more, and returned. However, our qualitative research on drop-out and over-aged learners points to a range of reasons, including pregnancy and young motherhood; seeking work; not being able to afford transport or uniforms; household migration; having to look after siblings; or having to look after sick family members (specifically people dying of AIDS).

Thus an educator in a school in Lenasia in Gauteng explained:

[My neighbour's daughter] had to remain behind looking after her mother. She had to abandon her schooling and look after her mother. There was no one in the house to do that except her. She had to bath her and cook for her. Ultimately the mother passed away and then she was able to go to school.

According to our household survey, a higher proportion of children and youths in KwaZulu Natal had missed school for a year or more (6,3 per cent) than those in other provinces (3,5 per cent). This may be related to high levels of HIV in KwaZulu Natal (with learners having to leave school to look after sick relatives, for example), but more research is needed.

A larger proportion of learners in informal settlements had missed a year or more of schooling and returned to school than those in other types of settlements.²⁹ This may be related to high levels of poverty in informal settlements, and the higher proportion of children who have experienced some form of migration.

In the next section, we show that children and youths living on farms are far more likely to be out of school than youths living in urban settlements (formal or informal) or traditional areas – and are one of the groups most vulnerable to being out of school in the 16-to-18 age group.

Box 8: Leaving school in search of work

In 2005, shortly after the school year began, Molo³⁹ left the school he was attending in Matatiele on the border of KwaZulu-Natal and the Eastern Cape because his family could not always afford the transport costs. Molo had been absent from school for several weeks in the previous year due to a lack of money for transport. He tells the following story:

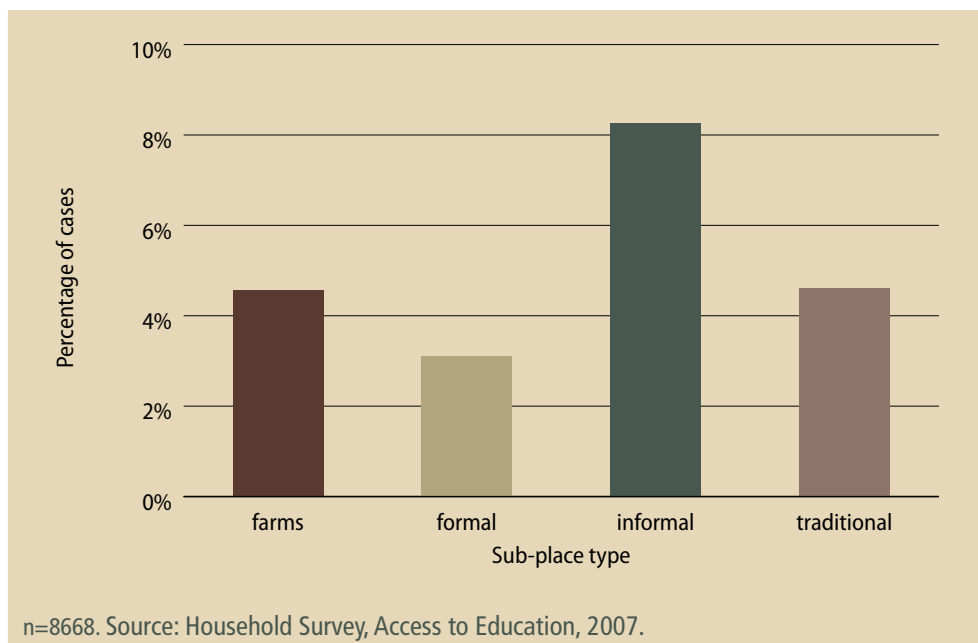
... my friend came to me because I was not going to school. He told me that there is lot of work in Durban and I should go with him to work there. I spoke to my grandmother and she agreed to give me transport money to go.

When I got there, there was no job, I had to spend the whole of February not working. I moved the following month to another area where my mother's sister stays. I also stayed there for a long time without finding work until some one came to ask me to remove sand from his yard. It was kind of difficult as there was lot of sand and I was using a wheelbarrow. I was paid hundred and fifty for that. After that I ended up just staying there as I could not find employment.

The reason I went back to school is that I was just sitting at home doing nothing ... and I was also avoiding getting into trouble, as you might know that when you [are] idle you might end up thinking of doing naughty things.

Source: Qualitative research on over-aged learners, Access to Education, 2010.

Figure 1: Absence from school for a year or more by sub-place, 2007⁴⁰



In our research on over-aged learners in 2010, interprovincial migration emerged as an important factor in explaining long absences from school. Many learners significantly older than their peers in the township of Bekkersdal in Gauteng had migrated from the Eastern Cape, Lesotho, or KwaZulu-Natal at some point during their school career. Only a few had moved with their biological parents; many had moved to Bekkersdal some years after their mothers had moved there. They often did so because of some household shock, such as the death of a primary caregiver. These migrations had led to some learners being out of school for more than a year, or long enough to have to repeat a grade.

We also collected data on the linkages between migration and education. Table 6 shows the proportions of households recorded in our household survey which had undertaken some form of migration in order to improve access to schooling.

Table 6: Migration aimed at improving access to schooling, 2007

Reason	Percentage of households
The household moved to improve access to education	2.4%
A child or children moved to improve access to education, while other household members remained behind	6.7%
Other household members moved while a child or children remained behind in order to retain access to education	1.7%
n=4317, n=4320, n=4314. Source: Household Survey, Access to Education, 2007.	

Table 6 shows that 7 per cent of households had sent one or more children to another home (while other household members remained behind) in order to improve their access to schooling.

Interestingly, a larger proportion of children (9 per cent of the total) in whole households which had moved had missed school for a year or more compared to those who had not moved (4 per cent). However, the results were not statistically significant. Further research is needed to assess whether decisions to improve learners' access to education can have a short-term detrimental impact on access, and to investigate the exact reasons why households or children move to access schooling.

Migration motivated by schooling does not necessarily show that children are moving to access better schools, or that they lack schools in some areas. Poor households may also decide to send their children to different schools in order to reduce the costs of education.

Thus Molo migrated from the village of Matatiele on the border of KwaZulu-Natal and the Eastern Cape, where he lived with his grandmother, to Gauteng, where his mother lived, because his family could no longer afford his travel costs to the local school in KwaZulu-Natal. In Gauteng, he could walk to school, and the school did not charge fees. Molo had to repeat Grade 10 as a result of the move. He had to adjust to a new home and a new school, and experienced a schooling delay, simply because his family could not pay for transport in Matatiele.



Who is out of school, and why?

Children and youths are seldom permanently out of school for one reason only; rather, most are out of school because of the compounded effects (over time) of a cluster of social and economic forces, as well as heavily circumscribed individual choices. The literature often refers to drop-out as a process rather than an event;⁴¹ therefore, the reasons for youths leaving school given below should rather be regarded as ‘catalysts’.

As noted in section one, only 1,2 per cent of children and youths of compulsory school-going age recorded in our household survey were out of school. However, ten percent of youths aged 16–18 and 20 per cent of youths aged 18 were out of school, with the data showing clear vulnerabilities to being out of school in these age groups. This section focuses on these vulnerabilities, and explores the reasons given by caregivers and youths themselves for the latter being out of school.

Box 9: Top four ‘catalysts’ for children aged seven to 18 leaving school⁴²

According to our household survey, the most common reasons for children and youths aged seven to 18 being out of school were:

- The general burdens of household poverty and the costs of education (primarily access costs rather than school fees);
- Teenage pregnancy, the main reason for girls leaving school;
- Disengagement from or a lack of interest in schooling; and
- Failing a grade, having learning difficulties, or always being behind with school work.

Source: Household Survey, Access to Education, 2007.

We concentrate on children and youths aged seven to 15 and 16 to 18 partly because the first age group is the compulsory schoolgoing age, and also because attendance starts dropping away from nearly 100 per cent after age 15. We should note that some of the out-of-school youths recorded in our surveys may since have returned to school.

Children of compulsory schoolgoing age

Few clear associations with being out of school emerge for children aged seven to 15 – partly because almost all children in this age group are in school.

Our household survey showed that the correlation between race and being out of school was negligible, with the differences between race groups being less than one per cent.⁴³

While less than 1 per cent of children living in formal or traditional areas were out of school, this figure increased to 3 per cent for children in informal settlements, and 5 per cent for children living on commercial farms.⁴⁴

According to the analysis by Fleisch et al of Community Survey data for 2007, while 4,5 per cent of children aged seven to 15 born in South Africa were out of school, 12 per cent of children born outside South Africa were out of school, suggesting that immigrant children are more vulnerable to drop-out than South African children.⁴⁵

Interestingly, according to our household survey, a large majority of households with children out of school – and with more than one child of schoolgoing age – had only one child out of school. When households with only one child of schoolgoing age are excluded, only 17 per cent of children out of school in the seven to 15 age group had a sibling or another household member out of school as well. What then are the reasons for one child leaving school and his or her siblings remaining in school?

Boys and girls are almost equally likely to be in or out of school; according to our household survey the difference in 2007 was less than one per cent,⁴⁶ a finding confirmed by the General Household Survey for the same year.

There is some debate in the South African literature whether living with both, one, or no biological parent has an effect on school attendance (and learning outcomes). Based on data collected in KwaZulu Natal in 2001, Anderson et al concluded that, 'relative to children living with both of their genetic parents, children living in all other family situations are less likely to be enrolled in school and are further delayed in school if enrolled.'⁴⁷ Zimmerman found that whether or not youths lived with biological parents did not make a difference.⁴⁸ (Our household survey did not establish whether or not children were living with their biological parents.)

According to our household survey, a greater proportion of disabled children were out of school. Fleisch et al also show that disabled children are particularly vulnerable to drop-out, with 22 per cent of disabled children aged seven to 15 identified in the Community Survey out of school.

In general, according to our study, when children of compulsory schoolgoing age are out of school, this seems to be because of localised, household, or child-specific experiences, probably in the context of household poverty.⁴⁹

In more than half of cases, reasons given by caregivers for youths in this age group being out of school were the costs of education and general stresses related to household pov-

erty. Nevertheless, as noted earlier, despite widespread household poverty almost all children in this age group are in school.⁵⁰

Box 10: Children and youths with disabilities

According to the World Health Organisation, between 2,2 per cent and 2,6 per cent of learners in any school system are disabled or impaired, a finding echoed by StatsSA figures for South Africa.⁵¹ Levels of intellectual disability may be higher than recorded in household or school-level surveys, as this is often not identified by caregivers and educators.⁵²

The white paper on learners with disabilities outlines how the school system should be changed to accommodate learners with 'special needs' or 'learning barriers' in ordinary public schools.⁵³

According to our household survey, 63 per cent of caregivers of disabled youths felt their schools did not cater adequately for the disability in question.

Youths aged 16–18

Our household survey did not record the ages at which youths aged 16 to 18 had left school; some might have been younger than 16. While data is available on the grades in which youths are most vulnerable to dropping out of school (the FET band, followed by Grade 9),⁵⁴ little data is available for the age at which most youths leave school. According to our youth survey (of youth aged 16–18), most youths left school at age 17, followed by 16 and then 15 (accounting for 84 per cent of the sample).⁵⁵

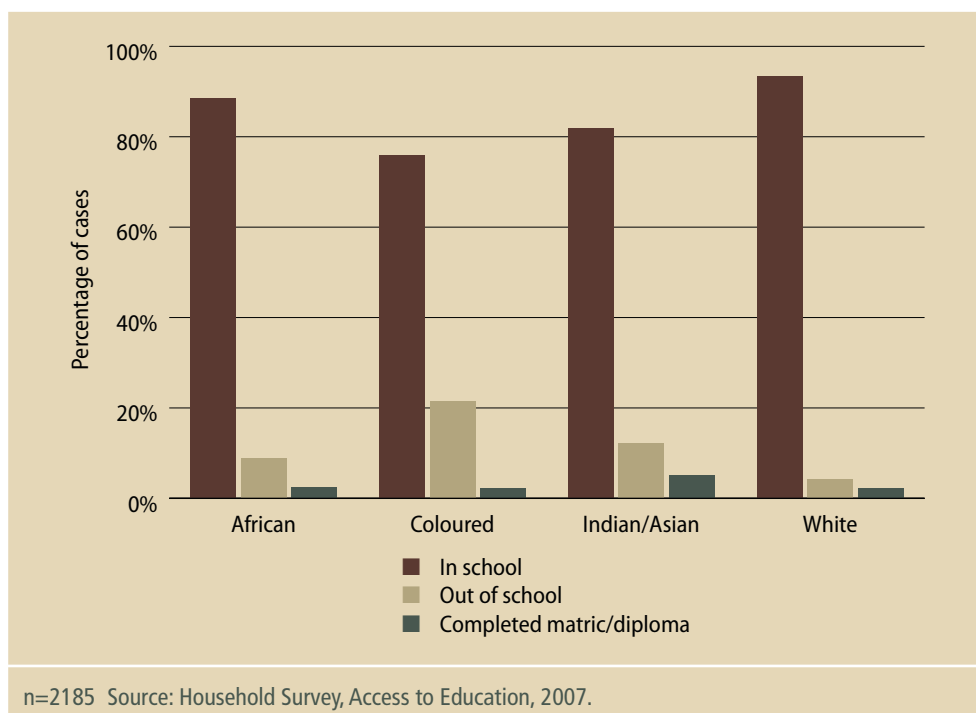
Vulnerabilities to drop-out for coloured and black youths

Our household survey shows that coloured youths aged 16 to 18 are far more likely to be out of school than black, white or Indian youths, as shown in Figure 2.⁵⁶

This finding is consistently confirmed by other surveys.⁵⁷ Male coloured youths aged 16–18 are also more likely to be out of school than female coloured youths; the figures in our household survey were 29 per cent and 19 per cent respectively.⁵⁸

Black youths aged 16–18 are not necessarily more likely to complete Grade 12 than coloured youths. General Household Survey statistics for 2007 show that just under a third of black youths aged 19–23 had completed matric or an equivalent NQF level, against 39 per cent of coloured youths. Black youths take much longer to get through school – primarily due to far higher levels of repetition – and are therefore more likely to drop out at higher ages.

Figure 2: School attendance by race, 2007



The reasons why some coloured youths drop out of school after age 15 are complex, and may be related to family pressure to seek work, substance abuse, and gang involvement, among others. Better access to jobs – particularly artisanal jobs – enjoyed by coloured people under apartheid may also play a role. While formal job reservation has ended, historical patterns of leaving school before matric may persist. Coloured youths on farms may also leave school to take up seasonal work

Box 11: Organised crime and gangs in Cape Town

According to research conducted by Children in Organised Armed Violence (COAV), levels of youth involvement in gangs in some coloured communities on the Cape Flats are very high.⁵⁹ Anecdotal evidence suggests that some youths leave school to join street gangs.⁶⁰ Learners and educators are also affected by gang-related violence in schools.⁶¹

Dysfunctional families, high living densities, high levels of alcohol and drug abuse, the 'Robin Hood' image cultivated by gang leaders, and a lack of opportunities all contribute to young people spending a lot of time on the streets and joining gangs.⁶² Anecdotal evidence from Manenberg indicates that youths join gangs at an early age (12–15), and then drop out of school.⁶³

Youths on farms

Youth aged 16–18 living on commercial farms are far more likely to leave school before completion than youths living in other types of settlements; according to our household survey, almost one in three youths living on farms (primarily farm labourers' children, or children in households that historically found work on commercial farms) had dropped out of school.

Drop-out in commercial farming areas may be exacerbated by youths finding work on farms (perhaps one of the few areas in which being in school has an opportunity cost, however low this may be in financial terms).

An educator in a high school in the Modimolle (formerly Nylstroom) township of Phag-ameng noted:

Youths who grew up on local farms think that once they reach grade seven they can get a job. They'll just drop out and go to work.⁶⁴

The poor quality and relative scarcity of schools offering tuition up to Grade 12 in farming areas may also play a role.⁶⁵ In 2000 only 9 per cent of farm schools offered tuition at the secondary level.⁶⁶

Table 7: School attendance of youths aged 16–18 by sub-place, 2007⁶⁷

	Ages 16 to 18			TOTAL
	In school	Out of school	Completed matric/ diploma	
Farms	66.3%	30.6%	3.1%	100%
Informal	84.3%	14.0%	1.7%	100%
Formal	88.2%	9.1%	2.7%	100%
Traditional	90.8%	7.2%	2.1%	100%

n=2204 Source: Household Survey, Access to Education, 2007.

Our study shows that drop-out among youths living on farms in the 16–18 age group is a problem particularly affecting coloured youths. According to our household survey, while 10 per cent of youths aged 16–18 were out of school, 50 per cent of coloured youths in this age group living on farms were out of school (the sample is small, though, and results should be regarded as anecdotal). The seemingly high proportion of coloured youth on farms dropping out of school may also be related to historical patterns of labour market access,⁶⁸ especially in the Western Cape.⁶⁹ In addition, substance abuse (and the impact of foetal alcohol syndrome in farming communities historically affected by the 'dop' system) may also play a role.⁷⁰

Disabled youths

Disabled children and youths are also highly vulnerable to dropping out of school. The General Household survey for 2007 found that 37 per cent of disabled youths aged 16–18 had dropped out of school, compared to 14 per cent of youths without a disability. Further research is needed on the drop-out rates of youths with different kinds of disabilities (including, for example, sight impairment and severe mental disability). For youths whose disabilities do not preclude them from engaging with some form of education, the lack of special needs schools and the costs associated with attending some of those schools may be real barriers to access. Caregivers of just under 3 per cent of out-of-school children and youths aged seven to 18 gave the high cost of special needs schools as a reason why the children in their care were not in school.

Parents' education and household resources

According to our household survey, the number of out-of-school youths aged 16–18 increases as their household scores on our socio-economic index worsen, and vice versa.⁷¹ The same was true of household access to infrastructure.⁷²

A lack of good sanitation, clean water and electricity as well as overcrowded homes are likely to impact on learners' ability to concentrate on school work and may also affect their health, thus affecting their performance at school. This in turn may lead to them being more likely to drop out of school. However, as noted below, these results are more likely to point to the broader impacts of poverty on school attendance.

Our household survey also revealed a clear relationship between school attendance and the level of education of adults. Table 8 shows attendance by education level of heads of households recorded in our survey.

Table 8: School attendance by level of education of household head, 2007

	Ages 16–18			Total
	In school	Out of school	Completed matric/diploma	
No formal education	82.8%	15.8%	1.4%	100.0%
Some/full primary education	86.5%	11.5%	2.0%	100.0%
Some secondary education	90.3%	7.8%	2.0%	100.0%
Grade 12/Form 5/ NTC3	92.6%	3.8%	3.6%	100.0%
Diploma/certificate without matric*	96.2%	3.8%	0.0%	100.0%
Tertiary education	93.4%	1.7%	4.9%	100.0%
ABET*	100.0%	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%
n=2148. *Small sample. Source: Household Survey, Access to Education, 2007.				

Moreover, our household survey shows that the proportion of youths out of school drops as the proportion of adults with a matric or a higher qualification in their households increases, and vice versa.⁷³

Higher levels of education generally ensure higher levels of household income and other social and financial resources, which will leave youths less vulnerable to dropping out of school. In addition, given that ‘there is strong reason to believe that school fees are correlated with school quality in South Africa,’⁷⁴ households with more financial resources can afford better education for their children. As we suggest below, youths who attend school in a stimulating and supportive environment are far less likely to leave school before completion.

The impact of household poverty

Our study shows clearly that household poverty is the overarching context in which most children and youths are made vulnerable to leaving school. Poverty has multidimensional impacts on learners’ participation in their schooling (which we explore further in Volume 3). However, not all these factors are direct causes of children and youths leaving school. For example, while hunger and malnutrition may affect concentration in class and on school work at home, and impact on learning outcomes, the Department of Basic Education’s Primary Schools Nutrition Programme may be persuading poor learners to attend school.⁷⁵ According to our household survey, 99 per cent of children whose caregivers said they were always hungry were in school. Education also provides poor families with hope that their children will find jobs and a way out of poverty.⁷⁶

Nevertheless, according to responses provided by caregivers of out-of-school youths aged 16–18, and out-of-school youths themselves, the most common reasons for leaving school were a lack of money for access costs or fees, and general financial pressures at home (leading to a decision to leave school to find work, for example). Family responsibilities in the context of low incomes (such as having to look after siblings, for example) also push youths in low-income households into leaving school.

Another factor is the vulnerability of poor households to financial and other shocks, such as when family members die or become ill. Ten per cent of caregivers of out-of-school youths noted that their child had left school after a death in the family.

Our study shows clearly that household poverty and the costs of education work in various ways to compel children and youths to leave school, and that school fees may be far less of a culprit than is often assumed.

School fees are low for the majority of children in South Africa (see Box 11), even though some government schools do not observe the regulations on fee exemptions and no-fee schools. According to our study, 50 per cent of learners aged seven to 18 paid less than R50 a year, and just under 40 per cent attending school without paying fees. Furthermore, less than 1 per cent of caregivers reported that their children had been denied access to school because of a failure to pay fees.

Yet the cost of education in the context of household poverty remains a barrier to completion for some poor households. Other costs, such as school uniforms and transport, can severely strain poverty-stricken households. Thus a young woman who took part in our focus groups in Thembelihle in Gauteng reported:

I attend night school at Apex because at home there are many of us, and I am the oldest, so my mother decided that I should go to night school because we don't have to wear uniforms like in day school. That will enable her to buy school uniforms for my other siblings who are attending day school. My mother is the only one who is working.⁷⁷

While less than one 1 per cent of children and youths in our household survey had been denied access to school because their fees had not been paid, many learners had been punished for not paying fees. A third of learners whose caregivers had struggled to pay school fees, or were unable to pay, had their report cards or exam results withheld, and a small proportion had been punished in other ways, such as being barred from writing exams (4 per cent), humiliated in class, made to do excessive exercise, made to stand in class (3 per cent), and more.

In our qualitative research some youths spoke about their acute sense of being different because they could not afford the same things as some of their classmates. Others said they had decided to leave school because they were embarrassed about not being able to afford lunch, money for civvies day, shoes, and so on.

When asked what concerned young people in her community, a respondent 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 ...⁷⁸

Box 12: School fees and other costs of access

Our survey findings on school fees and other costs of accessing schooling are as follows:

- 32 per cent of children and youths aged seven to 18 were not charged fees in 2007
- Fees between R1 and R100 were paid on behalf of 30 per cent of children
- 50 per cent of households spent less than R125 on fees
- 58 per cent of households spend more than R500 a year on uniforms
- Just over half of children in schools in quintiles 1, 2 and 3 spent R250 or more per year on uniforms
- 75 per cent of households did not pay for transport (children walked to school)

Source: Household Survey, Access to Education, 2007.

Box 13: Are boys or girls more likely to be out of school?

According to our household survey, a slightly greater proportion of boys aged 16–18 than girls were out of school, while more girls of this age had already completed matric or a diploma.⁸¹ This finding is supported by Department of Basic Education figures for the years 2000 to 2006.⁸²

A common indicator of gender equity in access to education is the Gender Parity Index (GPI). Here we report on the GPI for gross enrolment. The gross enrolment rate (GER) measures the participation of individuals in a specified category of education. The GPI for gross enrolment is the GER for females divided by the GER for males. A GPI of more than one shows that there are more females than males in the education system, but in proportion to the appropriate age for that grade or school phase.

The GPI in primary schools in 2007 was 0.98. The higher proportion of boys is related to a higher repetition ratio for boys than for girls (i.e., school delays that keep boys in primary school). At secondary level, the GPI was 1.01. As learners progress to secondary school, a larger proportion of males are out of school than females, particularly from Grade 10 onwards.

Table 10: Gender parity index per school phase

Age Band	Gender Parity Index
GET (Grades 1–9)	0.98
FET (Grades 10–12)	1.02
Primary school (Grades 7–12)	0.98
Secondary school (Grades 8–12)	1.01

Source: Calculated from Access to Education Household Survey data, 2007.

Another learner said:

You feel ashamed to bring your friend over to your house because you live in a shack with no electricity, and if they want to watch TV they can't.⁷⁹

While these factors may not be an issue in schools where children are all equally poor, they may be for those attending school in more socio-economically varied environments, such as previously Indian schools in Lenasia attended by learners from the informal settlement of Thembelihle in which we conducted qualitative research.⁸⁰ However, our finding on the impact of 'relative' poverty is not conclusive, and further research is needed.

Teenage pregnancy

According to both our household and youth surveys, teenage pregnancy was the most common reason why girls left school. According to caregivers, 44 per cent of girls who had left school had done so because they had fallen pregnant.

A 2003 study by the Reproductive Health and HIV Research Unit found that 15 per cent of teenage girls in South Africa aged 15–19 had been pregnant.⁸³ Data from the 2003 Status of the Youth Survey suggests that by age of 20 half of all girls and young women in South Africa have given birth to a child.⁸⁴

Research published in 2007 shows that black and coloured girls are more likely to fall pregnant.⁸⁵ Black and coloured youths are less likely to access quality education and good health services, and more likely to experience harsher socio-economic living conditions, than white and Indian youths. Poverty may also lead to transactional sexual activity (in exchange for material goods) in which there is often little opportunity to negotiate safe sex, thus increasing the risk of pregnancy and HIV/AIDS. In addition, social constructions of the value of pregnancy, power relationships between men and women, and sexual violence are also central issues related to teenage pregnancy.

Although caregivers said pregnancy was the main reason for girls leaving school, pregnancy may be the end result of a complex process of becoming disengaged from school. Hargreaves et al have suggested that when teenagers feel a sense of attachment or connection to school and are successful at school, they are less likely to fall pregnant.⁸⁶ School attachment, academic achievement, and higher aspirations for education offer incentives to teenagers to avoid pregnancy.

More young women fall pregnant after dropping out of school than before.⁸⁷ The HSRC Teenage Pregnancy Report also suggests that drop-out almost doubles the probability of becoming a father at a young age.⁸⁸

In 2006, Grant and Hallman showed that poor school performance before falling pregnant affected the likelihood of whether the girl involved would fall pregnant while enrolled in school, leave school as a result, and return to school after her pregnancy.⁸⁹

Box 14: Official policy on teenage pregnancy and access to school

According to the Constitution and the Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act (2000), learners who fall pregnant should not be discriminated against by schools. The South African Schools Act of 1996 makes it illegal to exclude pregnant learners from school. In July 2000, the Council of Education Ministers issued a statement reiterating that pregnant learners may not be expelled from schools.

A 2009 study for the HSRC shows that only about a third of teenaged mothers return to school.⁹⁰ Furthermore, those who share the responsibilities for caring for the baby with a mother or partner, and particularly those who live with an adult female, are far more likely to return to school than others.

Disengagement from schooling

According to our household survey, 17 per cent of out-of-school children and youths aged seven to 18 had left school because they simply no longer wanted to attend. Caregivers also reported youths leaving school because they were ‘mixing with bad company’ (9 per cent), drinking and taking drugs, ‘socialising’, and so on. Caregivers’ perceptions of reasons for leaving school may well differ from the reasons provided by the children and youths themselves, and these decisions were probably influenced by a complex of factors. Nevertheless, a lack of interest in school work, boredom, and a sense of being disengaged or alienated from their education emerged as prominent reasons for dropping out in our interviews of youths themselves in the youth survey.

Box 15: Findings on associations between being in / out of school from our Youth Survey (ages 16–18)

For almost all issues investigated in the Youth Survey (resources at school, support in the form of social workers and counsellors, and more) little difference was in the experiences of or access to resources between youths in school and the experiences and access to resources for out of school youths at the school they attend the year they left school.

While the sample size was small,⁹¹ three issues stood out: a far greater proportion of out of school youths bunked classes, and bunked more often, in the 12 months before leaving school than youths in school during the previous year.

A greater proportion of out of school youths reported taking drugs or drinking alcohol while still at school than youths in school at the time of the survey. Sixteen percent of out of school youths reported having taken drugs while at the last school they attended, versus 3 per cent of youths in school at the time of the survey.

Also, a greater proportion of out-of-school youths were bullied or assaulted by another learner. Thirty-nine percent reported being verbally bullied at their last school, versus 19 per cent of youths still in school. Twenty-three percent of out-of-school youths reported being physically bullied, versus 8 per cent of youths in school.⁹²

Source: Youth Survey, Access to Education, 2007

In very poor communities, a lack of opportunity for further studies and high unemployment rates for those who have completed matric combined with few positive role models in the form of adults who have completed their school education and become successful may impact on learners' motivation to remain in school.

However, the school environment may be a more important factor in explaining disengagement from education. International literature on 'school attachment' or 'bonding' suggests that a positive relationship with one's school and one's schoolgoing peers plays a vital role in preventing drop-out. This relationship is influenced by factors such as educator support and peer relationships, school and classroom leadership and management, a sense of belonging, a sense of safety, extracurricular activities, and more.⁹³

Although more male youths dropped out because of disengagement, we believe the same processes may make teenage girls vulnerable to pregnancy, and thus to dropping out. This may include a sense of limited futures, home environments not conducive to learning, a lack of stimulation at school (both academic and non-academic), poor relationships between educators and learners, poor learning outcomes, high repetition rates, and so on.

Academic struggle, repetition, and over-aged learners

As noted earlier, grade repetition is a prominent feature of schooling in South Africa. According to our household survey, 35 per cent of learners aged seven to 18 had repeated a grade. By Grade 12, every second learner had repeated a grade, and 9 per cent of Grade 12 learners have repeated three times or more.

In their review of literature on dropping out, Jimerson et al state that grade repetition is the 'most powerful predictor of drop-out status.'⁹⁴ Given the array of other factors influencing drop-out referred to earlier, this factor may not be as powerful in South Africa as in first world countries, but research in South Africa does suggest that youths – particularly coloured youths – who have repeated grades are more likely to drop out of school.⁹⁵

Ten percent of out-of-school youths aged 16–18 interviewed in our youth survey spoke of repeating a grade as a catalyst for leaving school, or mentioned problems associated with being older than their classmates (being embarrassed about their age, being teased or humiliated by educators or other learners). According to our household survey, 14 per cent of out-of-school youths aged seven to 18 had left either because they were struggling academically, or because they had to repeat a grade. In addition, 4 per cent of out-of-school children and youths aged seven to 18 were out of school because their schools had informed them that they were too old to enrol for their particular grade.

Box 16: Youths speak about grade repetition and dropping out

Ntuli is attempting Grade 8 for the third time. She has also repeated two other grades and is now five years older than most of her classmates. She explains:

I know how important education is in our times. But when my peers were promoted to Grade 9, leaving me behind in Grade 8 I gave up. I asked myself, what is wrong with me. But Mama forced me to go back to school.

Below we list some of the responses from respondents in our youth survey (ages 16–18) who had left school as a result of repeating (sometimes multiple times):

I felt embarrassed because I failed, I was sure I'd passed grade 10

I failed three times, I was supposed to attend with very small kids

As much as I wanted to attend I was over-age and the principal asked me to leave

I failed three times and was condemned to another level because of my age, they said I am not fit to go to school so I decided to leave

The educator was always shouting at me, telling me I'm too old for the grade.

I failed three times and was not on good terms with educators, they threatened me and I was told I would never pass

Sources: Qualitative research on over-aged learners, 2010; Youth Survey, Access to Education, 2007.

Youths who leave school after the age of 18

As noted earlier, the large majority of learners are still in school beyond the age of 18, yet many do not end up with a matric certificate.

We only collected data on the reasons for leaving school for children and youths aged seven to 18. Focused research is needed to explore the reasons why youths older than 18 leave school before completing the FET education, having spent so many years in school. Some of the reasons will no doubt be similar (household poverty, teenage pregnancy, and so on). However, grade repetition and being over-aged may feature more prominently. In addition, pressure on schools to perform in the high-stakes matric exams may result in them pushing out learners who are unlikely to succeed. Learners who have not been adequately prepared for the matric exams may themselves recognise that they are not coping, and feel that there is little point in trying to pushing through, especially in the context of adverse circumstances at home.⁹⁶

Conclusion

Absence from school for a full day does not appear to be a significant problem in South Africa, though anecdotal evidence from our focus group discussions with educators, as well as findings from the CASE/JET study, suggest that partial absence – specifically late arrival and skipping classes during the day – is a problem.⁹⁷ In some rural communities, the long distances to school and high transport costs exacerbates late arrival, but a host of other issues – including levels of discipline in schools, poor communication between youths and caregivers, and disengagement from schooling – play a role.

Education officials in North West have argued that the absence of educators is a bigger problem than the absence of learners.⁹⁸ The absence of educators is explored in Volume 3. Addressing educator absenteeism in some schools may also improve the timely attendance of students.

South Africa has taken major strides towards ensuring universal access to primary school and the GET curriculum. Our study shows that virtually all children and youths of compulsory schoolgoing age (seven to 15) are in school. Those who are not, are particularly vulnerable children in poor households, such as disabled children, and those no living with a biological parent.⁹⁹

Research¹⁰⁰ shows that disabled youths are more likely to be absent for short periods, and are particularly likely not to be out of school. Many of those who are in school are not properly catered for,¹⁰¹ because of a lack of physical resources as well as capable care.¹⁰² Research is needed to assess progress in providing education to disabled children in line with the government's policy on 'inclusive education'¹⁰³ in order to inform adequate interventions.

Enrolment begins to drop after 16, and drop-out is most acute in the FET band. While only 10 per cent of youths aged 16–18 are not in school, 20 per cent of 18-year-olds are not in school and have not completed Grade 12. Attainment of matric is low (see Volume 1).

Learners from some communities are clearly more vulnerable to dropping out immediately after compulsory schoolgoing age – most notably those living on commercial farms, and as well as those from low-income coloured communities (particularly coloured males).

Our surveys show that out-of-school youths did not leave to take up economic opportunities, but because of financial pressures and complex social processes (such as teenage pregnancy and substance abuse) often experienced in the context of poverty. (The multidimensional impact of poverty on access to schooling is explored in Volume 3). Those

social pressures combine with in-school factors (particularly the lack of stimulation and support in many schools) to see youths disengage from their education, and eventually drop out.

Youths also drop out because of multiple grade repetition, and the resultant age differences between them and their peers.

Despite these issues, most youths persevere in their education for years beyond the compulsory schoolgoing age. Our household survey only collected data on why youths aged seven to 18 leave school, and focused research is needed to establish why youths older than 18 leave school before completing FET, having spent up to 15 years in school in some instances. Some of the reasons will no doubt be the same. However, we suggest that grade repetition and being over-aged will feature more prominently.¹⁰⁴

Interventions to increase the proportion of youths completing matric and more efficient progress beyond GET needs to be based on a recognition of the close link between school completion and the quality of education.



Endnotes

1. The means tests was set out in regulations entitled Exemption of Parents from the Payment of School Fees Regulations, Government Notice 1293, Government Gazette 19347, October 1998. The new no-fee school policy is outlined in Department of Education, Amended National Norms & Standards for School Funding, Government Gazette No 29179, 31 August 2006; and the 2006 Regulations under the South African Schools Act, No 84 of 1996.
2. P Govender, Radical plan to provide poor schools with more funds, 12 June 2010. , www.timeslive.co.za.
3. See results of the annual General Household Survey and the Quarterly Labour Force Survey at www.statssa.gov.za.
4. See the Cape Area Panel Survey at www.caps.uct.ac.za, for example.
5. Republic of South Africa, Education Laws Amendment Act, No 50 of 2002, Government Gazette No 24113, Cape Town, 28 November 2002.
6. Republic of South Africa, South African Schools Act, No 84 of 1996.
7. For details of the pilot survey, sampling, weighting, and data quality control, see Social Surveys, Access to Education: Technical Report on the Household Survey, at www.socialsurveys.co.za. Hard copies are available on request.
8. One smallholding sub-place was drawn (in Gauteng, on the edge of Tshwane) and subsumed for analysis under the formal sub-place.
9. Ethics Protocol Number H070901.
10. The measure works out first, the proportion of people who have completed a grade (or higher) for each age in the age range (here nine to 23). Then the completion rate is taken as the highest rate calculated for each age across that age range (which is usually the highest age in the range, here the percentage of 23-year-olds who have completed a specified grade). See Department of Education, Trends in Education Macro-Indicators, Pretoria, 2009, p 44. The standard calculation of completion rates refers to the number of learners who successfully completed the last grade of a given level of education, expressed as a percentage of the population of the relevant age group for that particular grade. It is calculated by dividing the number of learners, regardless of age, who were promoted from the last grade of a given level by the population of the age group that officially corresponds with the given grade, and multiplying the result by 100. See UNESCO Institute of Statistics, Education Indicators Technical guidelines, November 2009. The alternative calculation method of completion rate is provided partly because it is a more easily accessible indicator of completion for a broad audience, and partly because completion rates calculated from EMIS data are unreliable. See Department of Education, Trends in Education Macro-Indicators, Pretoria, 2009, p 43.
11. Department of Education, Trends in Education Macro-Indicators, p 55.
12. Based on averaging attendance per age for ages seven to 15. From A De Lannoy and L Lake, Children's access to education, in S Pendlebury et al (eds), South African Child Gauge, 2008/9, Children's Institute, University of Cape Town, pp 82-89.

13. B Fleisch et al, Children out of school: evidence from the Community Survey, in Pendlebury et al, South African Child Gauge, pp 41-45.
14. CASE and JET, Learner Absenteeism in the South African schooling System, Report commissioned by the Department of Education, December 2007.
15. See, for example, Labour Force Survey 2006, cited in CASE and JET, Learner Absenteeism in the South African Schooling System.
16. Accurate data on learner absence from school is hard to come by. For one thing, caregivers and youths often struggle to recall all instances of absenteeism over an extended period such as a year. In addition, caregivers and youths may be reluctant to mention instances of absence from school caused by factors at home or in the community that are difficult to talk about, or which respondents would prefer to conceal. For example, our focus group discussions with youths identified some causes of absenteeism that were not enumerated in the survey, or mentioned by caregivers in our focus groups, such as children being raped or physically abused by household members. Data from school records may also not accurately reflect levels of absenteeism, as educators, are to some extent, incentivised to under-report absenteeism.
17. An indicator which captures information about absenteeism across the whole year is ideal, but faces the problem of memory recall. To address this problem, the question developed to measure absenteeism in the pilot study was: 'How many days of school has [name] missed in the last 30 days?' However, by the time we went into field in October 2007, learners in government schools had already been at school for a longer period than those in private schools, leaving data for government and private school incomparable. Asking how many days learners had missed in the last term obviously faced the same problem. In addition, patterns of absenteeism patterns change over the school year, and absenteeism may be experienced to a greater degree at different times for different children. We therefore decided to refer caregivers to the entire school year, but to provide the respondent with categories of days of school missed from which to choose - which was believed to be more reliable than leaving the question open, as this could help to jog their memory.
18. Labour Force Survey, March 2006, cited in CASE and JET, Learner Absenteeism in the South African Schooling System, p 22.
19. n=4991.
20. n=4991.
21. Responses were broadly grouped because of the small percentage of learners affected by each factor mentioned by caregivers.
22. n=9224.
23. Department of Education, Report on Learner Transport, presented to the Portfolio Committee on Basic Education, February 2008, <http://www.pmg.org.za/files/docs/080219presentation1.ppt> (DoT 2005:93)
24. n=9142. While 16 per cent of learners without a disability had missed more than five days of schooling, a quarter of disabled children had missed more than five days. Statistically significant association: ($\chi^2= 7.2587$, sig=0.0008).
25. V Dieltiens and S Meny-Gibert, School drop-out: poverty and patterns of exclusion, in S Pendlebury et al (eds), South African Child Gauge, 2008/2009, Children's Institute, University of Cape Town, pp 46-49.
26. n=9002.
27. Whether skipping classes: n=750; of those skipping classes: n=82.

28. CASE and JET, Learner Absenteeism, p 90.
29. Volume 3 explores issues of relationships between learners and teachers, sexual assault, and so on.
30. R Maarman, Manifestations of 'capabilities poverty' with learners attending informal settlement schools, *South African Journal of Education*, 29, 2009, p 328.
31. Ibid.
32. Qualitative research, *Access to Education Study*, February 2007.
33. Ibid.
34. n= 8601.
35. Water source, energy used for lighting, and type of sanitation.
36. For more information on how the index was developed, refer to *Social Surveys, Access to Education: Technical Report on the Household Survey*.
37. On average, for every one unit of decrease in the SES index, the odds of missing a year or more of school increased by 1,6 per cent. Results were found to be statistically significant at a 1 per cent significance level.
38. n= 8668. Percentage of learners who had missed a year or more of schooling and returned: formal: 3.1 per cent, traditional: 4.6 percent, farms: 4.6 per cent, informal: 8.3%. Statistically significant association: ($\chi^2=7.8153$, sig=0.0057)
39. The names of respondents have been changed.
40. Statistically significant association: ($\chi^2=5.2542$, sig=0.0019).
41. G Montes & C Lehmann, Who will drop out from school? Key predictors from the literature, *Children's Institute Technical Report T04-001*, 2004.
42. All data on the reasons why children and youth left school from the household survey (ages seven to 18): n=154. From the youth survey: n=61.
43. Results of the chi squared test were not statistically significant.
44. $\chi^2=67.38$, sig=0.000.
45. Fleisch et al, *Children out of school*, p 44.
46. Results of the chi squared test were not statistically significant.
47. K Anderson et al, *Causes and Consequences of Schooling Outcomes in South Africa: Evidence from Survey Data*, PSC Research Report, Report No 01-490, Population Studies Center, Institute for Social Research, University of Michigan, October 2001.
48. S Motala et al, *Education Access in South Africa: An Analytic Report*, Consortium for Research on Educational Access, Transitions and Equity and the University of Witwatersrand Education Policy Unit, CREATE Country Paper, June 2007, pp 84-85.
49. Personal communication with Brahm Fleisch, 2008.
50. Using the 40th percentile, 54,3 per cent of households fall below the line (R470 a month). Calculated from 2007 StatsSA data.
51. P Lehohla, *Prevalence of Disability in South Africa, Census 2001*, Pretoria: Statistics South Africa, 2005, p 13.
52. A Christianson et al, *Children with intellectual disability in rural South Africa: prevalence and associated disability*, *Journal of Intellectual Disability Research*, 46(2), 2002, pp 179-186.
53. Department of Education, *Education White Paper 6: Special Needs Education. Building an Inclusive Education and Training System*, 2001.
54. Department of Education, *Trends in Education Macro-Indicators*, p 55.
55. n=57.
56. Statistically significant association for 16 to 18: ($\chi^2=33.91$, sig=0.000).
57. The Labour Force and General Household surveys, for example.

58. The relationship for male youths between the ages of 16 to 18 was found to be statistically significant ($\chi^2=28.95$, sig=0.000), but not when comparing female learners across race groups.
59. T Legget, *Terugskiet (returning fire): Growing up on the street corners of Manenberg, South Africa*, COAV, 2007.
60. Y Naidoo, 2008, *W Cape pupils in danger of gangsterism*, Cape Argus, 17 January 2008, http://www.iol.co.za/index.php?set_id=1&click_id=13&art_id=vn20080117111313295C956202
61. K M Dos Reis, *The influence of gangsterism on the morale of educators on the Cape Flats, Western Cape*, CPUT Theses & Dissertations, Paper 44, 2007.
62. I Kinnes, *From urban street gangs to criminal empires: the changing face of gangs in the Western Cape*, Pretoria: Institute for Security Studies, 2000; Legget, *Terugskiet*.
63. Legget, *Terugskiet*.
64. *Qualitative research, Access to Education Study*, 2007.
65. Department of Education, Ministerial Committee on Rural Education, 2005; M Gardiner, *Education in rural areas*, Johannesburg: Centre for Education Policy Development, 2008, p 29.
66. J Shindler, *A statistical overview of farm schools in South Africa*, 2000, EduSource Data News No 45, October 2004, Education Foundation Trust.
67. Statistically significant association: ($\chi^2=69.48$, sig=0.001).
68. Legget, *Terugskiet*.
69. Black Sash, *The Coloured Labour Preference Area Policy*, Paper presented by Cape Western Region to National Conference, 1983, <http://www.lib.uct.ac.za/blacksash/pdfs/cnf19830311.026.001.000.pdf>
70. Legget, *Terugskiet*.
71. Not found to be statistically significant.
72. We explored water source, sanitation type, households' source of energy for lighting, and household living density. Statistically significant associations: sanitation source: ($\chi^2=20.19$, sig=0.008); living density: ($\chi^2=66.38$, sig=0.000). Other infrastructure types were not found to be statistically significant. Note that the majority of coloured youths as well as all Indian and white youths had access to electricity and flush toilets inside the dwelling. The results for electricity access essentially reflect access patterns for black youths, and the results for sanitation and water source reflect black and coloured access patterns.
73. Education level of the household head: statistically significant association: ($\chi^2=56.13$, sig=0.001). Proportion of adults in the household with a matric: statistically significant association: ($\chi^2= 16.4962$, sig=0.0000).
74. Anderson et al, *Causes and Consequences*, p 5.
75. Dieltiens and Meny-Gibert, *School drop-out*, pp 46-49.
76. Ibid.
77. *Qualitative research, Access to Education Study*, February 2007.
78. Ibid.
79. Ibid.
80. For an extended argument on relative poverty and access, see Dieltiens and Meny-Gibert, *School drop-out*, pp 46-49.
81. Results were not found to be statistically significant.
82. Motala et al, *Educational Access in South Africa*, p 51.

83. S Panday et al, Teenage pregnancy in South Africa with a specific focus on school-going learners, Human Sciences Research Council, Pretoria, 2009.
84. Human Sciences Research Council, Status of Youth Report 2003, commissioned by the Umsobomvu Youth Fund, 2005.
85. T A Moultrie & N McGrath, Teenage fertility rates falling in South Africa, *South African Medical Journal*, 97, 2007, pp 442-443.
86. J Hargreaves et al, The association between school attendance, HIV infection and sexual behaviour in rural South Africa, *Journal of Epidemiological Community Health*, 62, 2008, pp 113-119.
87. Panday et al, Teenage pregnancy in South Africa.
88. Ibid.
89. M Grant & K Hallman, Pregnancy-related school drop-out and prior school performance in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, *Studies in Family Planning*, 39(4), 2006, pp 369-382.
90. Panday et al, Teenage pregnancy in South Africa.
91. The sample comprised 751 in-school youths and 61 out-of-school youths. From Access to Education household survey, 2007.
92. The question put to respondents was: 'Have you ever experienced or been the victim of physical bullying or violence at school (not sexual abuse)?'
93. For a summary of the literature, see, for example, H P Libbey, Measuring student relationships to school: attachment, bonding, connectedness, and engagement, *Journal of School Health*, 74(7), 2004.
94. Cited in Department of Education, Learner Retention in the South African Schooling System: Report to the Minister of Education, G N M Pandor, MP, May 2008, p 67.
95. Dieltiens and Meny-Gibert, School drop-out, p 49.
96. Dieltiens and Meny-Gibert, School drop-out, p 49.
97. CASE and JET, Learner Absenteeism, p 90.
98. Ibid, p 66.
99. As suggested by results from the Community Survey, 2007.
100. Access to Education Household Survey 2007; Community Survey 2007; General Household Survey 2007.
101. Access to Education Household Survey, 2007; Department of Education, White Paper 6, Special Needs Education: Building an Inclusive Education and Training System, 2001, p 9.
102. M W Ladbrook, Challenges experienced by educators in the implementation of inclusive education in primary school in South Africa, Pretoria: University of South Africa, 2009.
103. 'In an inclusive education and training system, a wider spread of educational support services will be created in line with what learners with disabilities require. This means that learners who require low-intensive support will receive this in ordinary schools and those requiring moderate support will receive this in full-service schools. Learners who require high-intensive educational support will continue to receive such support in special schools.' Department of Education, Education White Paper 6, p 15.
104. Dieltiens and Meny-Gibert, School drop-out, p 49.

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