

School drop-outs and imprisoned youths

Young people equate life as a 'drop-out' to living in a prison, writes SAADHNA PANDAY and FABIAN ARENDS, following discussions held on learner retention at the fourth round table of the Youth Policy Initiative (YPI) – an HSRC project to highlight key challenges facing young people and finding possible solutions.

WHAT DO 'DROP-OUTS' DO with their time? Labelled as 'outcasts' and 'losers', life is filled with negativity and lack of purpose. Without access to income, young people are home-bound, hang out on street corners, hustle to make a living through informal trading, and become easy recruits for criminals.

When work does come their way, it is often piece-meal, poorly paid and labour intensive. 'Drop-outs' are the waiters, security guards, taxi-drivers, cleaners, gardeners and handy-men of our society. But work seldom comes without a 'connection' – a social network is a prerequisite to link them with opportunities.

The round table on learner retention sought to interrogate the adequacy of data sources to determine 'drop-out'; to identify reasons for 'drop-out'; and to discuss possible interventions. Lead speaker Gugu Nyanda outlined that absolute numbers of 'drop-out' are difficult to estimate because data collected through the Education Management Information Systems (EMIS) of the Department of Education (DoE), is not geared towards measuring and monitoring 'drop-out'.

Despite major concerns among researchers about the quality, reliability and completeness of data, and a lack of conceptual understanding of what constitutes 'drop-out', some trends can be intimated from data collected by the DoE and the Statistics South Africa's recent Community Household Survey.

ENROLMENT DATA

Participation levels of the 7 to 15 year age group in the South African population have reached universal enrolment levels of approximately 90% or higher in all provinces. Grades 1 and 2 are characterised by over-

enrolment, pointing towards high levels of repetition rather than 'drop-out'. Nevertheless, the majority of children are completing primary schooling and for the most entering secondary school.

...pervasive and chronic poverty underpins the reasons for learners' not completing school. ”

Entry into secondary school level is characterised by a 'revolving door syndrome' – young people are able to get there, but are circulating in the system unable to make it through to matric. This is qualified by the Community Household Survey that shows overall improvement in the percentages of the population with no schooling and those with higher education, but very slow progress in the proportion attaining matric. Enrolment starts to decline sharply at the end of compulsory schooling at grade 9, or 15 years of age. As such, the highest 'drop-out' rates are experienced from age 16 to 18 years, roughly corresponding to grades 10 to 12.

'DROP-OUT' DATA

Data on the reasons for 'drop-out' are also limited. What information is available suggests that repetition and low achievement because of a lack of remedial programmes may be chief among the reasons for bleeding in the system. Poor quality of interaction between teachers and learners also contributes to learners' exiting the system.

Young people concurred with these findings, and suggested that a culture of failure had

become normative. They expressed frustration with the inexperience of teachers, often teaching subjects for which they were not qualified, and the lack of relevance of education to the South African context and to day-to-day life experience. Peer pressure to engage in anti-social behaviour and lack of discipline were also some of the push factors within the schooling system.

Conditions within the home and the community also pull learners out of school. These include financial difficulties by way of direct costs (school fees), indirect costs (transport, books, uniforms), and opportunity costs of education (having to work to support the family, household chores, and taking care of siblings).

Young people also cited health concerns (teen pregnancy and caring for parents and siblings infected by HIV) as reasons for 'drop-out'. Underpinning these factors was limited parental support to cope with both the technical and social aspects of schooling.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In summarising the findings of the round table, the Chair, Prof. Mary Metcalfe, indicated that interventions must recognise that pervasive and chronic poverty underpins the reasons for learners' not completing school. Furthermore, the sectoral insularity that currently characterises service delivery must change. As outlined above, the reasons for 'drop-out' reach beyond the borders of the school yard and are part economic, part social, and part personal. As such, learner retention cannot be the sole responsibility of the Department of Education. An integrated and cross-sectoral approach is a prerequisite. The round table proposed the following interventions to create good first chances:



Youth Policy Initiative

Giving voice to young people is one of the aims of the Youth Policy Initiative – a project led by the HSRC in partnership with the youth sector, key government departments, non-governmental organisations and the media.

The Initiative consists of six round table discussions at which experts from the policy, programme and research environments are brought together to highlight key challenges confronting young people. At these round-tables, participants debate the nature of the challenges and their possible solutions, and discuss multi-sectoral and integrated approaches to addressing them.

For more information, go to www.hsrc.ac.za/ypi.

Young people suggested that a culture of failure had become normative. They expressed frustration with the inexperience of teachers often teaching subjects for which they were not qualified, and the lack of relevance of education ”

- Extend the child support grant to 18 years of age and attach conditions for school completion, as has been successfully demonstrated in South America;
- Build into the education system much more rigorous quality assurance such that the experience of schooling is meaningful and gainful;
- Strengthen the availability of resources to teachers, both within the education and social services systems, to identify and support learners at risk of dropping out – such as school aids and peer support mechanisms;
- Increase the investment in early childhood development and the foundation phase to ensure readiness for school and to prevent early repetition – evidence for which is unequivocal; and
- Improve counselling services available to learners both within the schooling system and through parallel support services such as churches and youth structures.

Given the sheer numbers of young people who exit the schooling system prematurely, Carmel Marock, a discussant at the round table, indicated that a wider and more flexible range of learning pathways had to be promoted to create second chances. Many young people want to obtain their matric but they are largely unaware of the alternative pathways and these pathways are stigmatised as second class education for ‘school rejects’. But the value of Further Education and Training (FET) and other vocational programmes such as the National Youth Service and Expanded Public Works Programme must be conveyed and adequate resources allocated to strengthen these systems, including funding for potential students to access them.

For learners in Grades 10 to 12 and beyond to be able to enter and complete alternative pathways, they need to be linked to viable exit opportunities either in the form of further education or the workplace. Hence

greater coherence is required amongst skills development programmes and between alternative pathways and the world of work. Given the social, economic and personal factors that underpin school ‘drop-out’, alternative pathways must be closely aligned to social support services.

If we hope to turn the tide on the low status attached to FET and to encourage learners to see this as a continuation of their education, we need to espouse a more positive and empowering discourse about school ‘drop-out’; the round table proposed the term ‘non-completer’ or ‘not-yet-complete’ to signify someone who has not yet achieved the status of grade or certificate completion. ●

Dr Saadhna Panday is a senior research specialist in the Child, Youth, Family and Social Development research programme, and Mr Fabian Arends is a research specialist in the Education, Science and Skills Development research programme.