
In class? Poverty, social exclusion and school access in South Africa

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Abstract

The commonly used explanation for school-drop out – that high costs in an environment of absolute poverty drives learners from school – is unsatisfactory in the South African context. An expanded understanding of poverty as a barrier to school access is proposed in which the absolute notion of poverty is complemented with the concept of relative poverty to better explain enrolment and drop out patterns in the country. We argue that it is learners' subjective experience of poverty in contexts of inequality that elevate the risk of drop-out. This should turn policy attention to the terms of inclusion into schools.

Introduction

Poverty is often used in international documents to explain limited access to schools (UNESCO, 2010) and there have been global campaigns to bring down the cost of schooling and increase social spending with some meaningful results. In Kenya, for example, the introduction of fee-free schooling had a dramatic increase in enrolments (Kattan, 2006).

Poverty is also often given as an important reason for why learners drop out of school in South Africa. (APF, 2003; ERP, n.d.; Wilson, 2004; Fleisch and Woolman, 2004; Nelson Mandela Foundation, 2005). It is often taken for granted that inability to pay school fees (Roithmayr, 2002), the costs of uniform, shoes, transport, stationery, added to the opportunity costs of what children might be contributing to household labour, eat away at meagre resources and push children from school (Fleisch and Woolman, 2004). The South African Department of Education¹ has implemented a number of indigent policies in an attempt to surmount the inhibiting costs of accessing schools, most notably that of declaring approximately 60% of schools fee-

¹ In 2009 the national Department of Education was split into two separate departments, each with its own Ministry: the Department of Basic Education, responsible for primary and secondary education, and the Department of Higher Education and Training, responsible for tertiary education.

free.² For children attending fee paying schools, households whose monthly income is between 10 and 30 times the school fee qualify for a full or partial fees exemption. In addition, pro-poor financing policies redistribute government expenditure in favour of the poorest schools.

In this paper we present data from a study on access to school education in South Africa undertaken in 2007 by Social Surveys Africa and the Centre for Applied Legal Studies (the Barriers to Education Study). The Study provided an independent estimate of school enrolment, and identified the range of barriers to entering and remaining in school for children and youths aged seven to 18. While the data shows that poverty remains a driver of school drop-out in the South African case, it provides new insight into the *manner* in which poverty sees children and youths leaving school before completion. The data suggests that school fees are less of a culprit than previously suggested in the literature, possibly as a result of the introduction of pro-poor policies by the Department of Education. Data also shows that the barriers to remaining in school caused by other access costs are varyingly felt by poor households across the country. Lastly, based on a close analysis of the processes through which poor children and youths left school, we suggest that in theorising the impact of poverty on school attendance the concept of absolute poverty needs to be complemented by notions of relative poverty and social exclusion for explanatory depth.

Research on the Barriers to Education Study began with focus group discussions with caregivers, youths and teachers in four rural and urban sites in the provinces of Limpopo and Gauteng respectively. This was followed by a nationally representative survey of households in South Africa in which the primary caregivers of children aged seven to 18 were interviewed in each household. Data collected was weighted up to the national population. Youths in the sampled households aged 16 to 18 were also interviewed, in what is referred to in this paper as the Youth Survey.

² All Public Ordinary Schools in South Africa are classed into one of five quintiles, determined by analysing socio-economic indicators of the communities surrounding the school. In 2007, schools in quintiles 1 to 2 were declared no-fees schools. This was extended to quintile 3 schools in 2010. As of 2012, schools will be categorized as either fee paying, or non-fee paying.

School enrolment in South Africa

In 2007, approximately 96 per cent of children and youths aged seven to 18 were in school (Meny-Gibert and Russell, 2010). Dropping out of school during the compulsory school going age (seven to 15) is a relatively small problem. Data from the Barriers to Education Study shows that 98.8% of children of this age group are in school (Meny-Gibert and Russell, 2010).³ Participation in the Basic Education Phase⁴ is high, as shown by high Gross Enrolment Ratios (GERs) in Grades 1 to 9 (recording GERs of 100% or more) (Department of Education, 2009).

Enrolment rates remained very high up to age 15, dropping progressively from age 16 (Meny-Gibert and Russell, 2009). A substantial proportion of youths remain in school well beyond the age of 18 (the age that youths will be when completing school if they enter school at the correct age and do not repeat or miss schooling). Despite this, levels of completion of a Matric education (the final school leaving certificate) are low, with the Department of Basic Education estimating achieved completion rate of only 44% for Grade 12 (Department of Education, 2009).⁵ South Africa shows high levels of school enrolment for long into the population age, and yet low levels of completion, primarily because repetition rates are high. By the final phase of schooling, 9% of learners will have repeated a grade three times or more (Meny-Gibert and Russell, 2010).

³ Statistics South Africa's General Household Survey 2007 puts attendance for this age group at 98% and Statistics South Africa's Community Survey: 95.4%

⁴ The Basic Education phase comprises Grades 1 to 9. Grades 10 to 12 are known as the Further Education and Training Phase. School attendance is compulsory for children from the age of seven to the age of 15, or until the completion of Grade 9, whichever comes first.

⁵ The Department of Education's Trends in Education Macro-Indicators (2009) presents the level of school completion by calculating the 'achieved completion rates' for various grades. This is done by calculating the proportion of people in a particular age range who have completed a specific grade. The highest completion rate for a single age is taken as the completion rate for the grade in question.

Theorising poverty

‘Absolute poverty’ refers to households living below a minimum standard necessary to sustain subsistence. People falling under some fixed absolute threshold – such as the Millennium Development Declaration of ‘a dollar a day’ – can be defined as ‘poor’, living under economic stress as they struggle to buy basic necessities. Absolute poverty is a powerful and popular indicator of poverty and is particularly useful in tallying up how many people are poor, enabling comparisons across geographies and time.

The concept of absolute poverty has its limitations, however. As an aggregated and objective measure, it “ignores other relevant information on the depth and distribution of poverty” (Foster, 1998, p.336) and it does not gauge indexes of inequality. Neither does it reflect on poor peoples’ perceptions of relative deprivation (Ravallion, 2008).

Unlike the basic survival unit of analysis of absolute poverty, relative poverty (or relative deprivation) focuses on inequalities within society. Noble, Wright and Cluver explain that poverty must be understood in relation to “the general living standards of the society as a whole or in terms of the resources that are required to participate fully in that society” (Noble *et al.*, 2007, p.55).

Relative poverty is therefore a subjective reference on what is minimally required to live as a citizen within a context. Ravallion writes: “The issue of how much relative deprivation matters to poor people is of utmost importance to policy discussions about how to fight poverty.” (2008, p.4). Relinquishing an objective measure of poverty opens up space for an engagement on a subjective evaluation of poverty and well-being. A phenomenological approach allows for the admission of the psycho-social experience of poverty. Poverty is not simply about material deprivation: it has effects on how people see themselves in relation to others in society and whether they are able to participate fully in society. Wright, Nobel and Magasela (2007) report that participants in focus groups for the Indicators of Poverty and Social Exclusion Project pointed to the importance of “‘social’ goods for the home” and “appropriate and dignified clothing” as essential needs. “When asked why they considered a given item as essential, participants often referred to social themes such as respect or respectability, dignity and decency” (Wright *et al.*, 2007, p.6).

Relevant to an expanded and relative definition of poverty, is the literature on social exclusion. The concept of social exclusion is concerned with the experiences of poverty, its inequitable outcomes and the processes that lead to exclusion (see for example Hickey and Du Toit, 2007 and SPII, 2008). For social exclusion theorists, poverty is by definition, a relative concept. “People are judged to be poor if they are poor *in comparison* to those around them” (SPII, 2008, p.22). The value of the social exclusion research for understanding how poverty impacts on school attendance and drop-out is that it shifts policy attention from a sole focus on the economic to the social and psychological. We return to this literature later in the paper in presenting new research on the manner in which poor learners are excluded from schooling in South Africa.

Absolute poverty and school access

If absolute poverty is a direct cause for school drop-out, this is not immediately clear in the South African case given that enrolment rates are high despite extreme levels of poverty. On a conservative estimate of absolute poverty (using the bottom 20th percentile in terms of household income as the poverty line) 31.3% of households in South Africa lived below the poverty line in 2007 (Oosthuizen, 2008). This figure jumps to 54.3% of households using the 40th percentile in terms of household income (approximately \$65 per month) (Oosthuizen, 2008).⁶ Children are disproportionately affected, with 64% of children living below this poverty line in 2008 (Hall, 2008).

There is evidence to suggest that poverty has an impact on school attendance patterns in South Africa. Studies undertaken in 2002 suggest that poverty may delay entry into school. Case, Hosegood and Lund (2005) assessed the impact of the Child Support Grant⁷ in the Umkhanyakude district in the KwaZulu-Natal province, and found that the grant appeared to “overcome the impact of poverty on school enrolment” (2005, p.469). The study found that children who received the grant (in 2002) were significantly more likely to be enrolled

⁶ The poverty line was R470 per month or \$65 per month using an average US Dollar-ZAR exchange rate for 2007.

⁷ The Child Support Grant is a non-conditional means-tested cash transfer given to single parents or multiple caregiver households whose monthly income is less than R2500 or R5000 respectively, now available for children up to the 18. The grant has steadily increased from R110 per eligible child per month in 2002 to R250 in 2010.

in school for the first time in the years following receipt of the grant than equally poor children of the same age (Case, Hosegood and Lund, 2005). Because grant recipient households were poorer on average (measured in terms of household assets, parents' educational attainment and employment), the findings of the survey suggested that the Child Support Grant enabled households to cover the expenses of schooling or to improve the nutrition and health of learners, both of which contributed to their school readiness.

Poverty may not just delay school entry but also protract the journey through school. Hallman and Grant (2004), reporting on a longitudinal study in the Durban Metro and rural Mtunzini Magisterial District of KwaZulu-Natal, observed that most young people had attained at least primary education by age 20, but poor children are more likely to have had 'school delays'.⁸ Of the approximately 3000 adolescents interviewed, more than half of the 14- to 15-year-olds in the lowest socio-economic quintiles had experienced a delay in schooling. By contrast, in the highest asset-rich quintile, only 27% of boys and 15% of girls had experienced delays.

Using 1995 October Household Survey data, Anderson, Case, and Lam (2001) found that African children who were lagging behind in their school grade had less money spent on school fees, school transport, and other school expenses. Learners who were behind six or more years for their grade had approximately half as much money spent on their schooling as children who were age-appropriate.

Poverty also affects daily school attendance. A study focusing on children in rural areas by the Nelson Mandela Foundation (2005) revealed domestic and agricultural chores and long distances travelled to schools often ate into the school day or resulted in absenteeism (also see Maarman, 2009). The lack of secondary schools close to home and the cost of transport was perceived to be a primary reason for learners dropping out of school. The study also revealed instances of learners missing periods of the school term when fees had not been paid.

Hunger and malnutrition affect learners' concentration on school work and impacts negatively on learning outcomes. However, the Department of Basic Education's Primary Schools Nutrition Programme (PSNP), which offers

⁸ A delay is defined as a year of non-advancement because of either not having enrolled at all during a particular year (but eventually returning to school), or withdrawal during the year, or repeating a grade because of poor performance the previous year.

children a daily meal, may act as an incentive for learners living in poverty to attend school. Data from the Barriers to Education Survey shows that 84% of primary school learners had access to feeding schemes at school (either the PSNP or a feeding scheme provided by the community, school, charity or civil society organisation) (Strassburg, Meny-Gibert and Russell, 2010b). Whilst the provision of school feeding schemes varies across the country, research published by the Public Services Commission shows that where the PSNP was provided, it saw increased regular school attendance (PSC, 2008).

There is some debate in the literature on the impact of poverty on school completion. In 2002 paper written for the Education Rights Project, Roithmayr asserted that removing the school fees from the public school system would facilitate a realisation of the South African government's constitutional mandate of ensuring access to school for all learners (Roithmayr, 2002). Roithmayr's argument rests partially on assumption that school fees prevent a large number of children from accessing school education. Drawing on research undertaken by the Vuk'nyithate Research Consortium (Porteus *et al.*, 2000 cited in Fleisch and Woolman, 2004), Fleisch and Woolman respond to Roithmayr in arguing that school fees are not a significant barrier to access:

The VRC [Vuk'nyithate Research Consortium] study of out-of-school children demonstrates that the reasons for a family's decision not to enrol children in school was not primarily related to fees, but was the result of a combination of factors including deep poverty, lack of family structure, stability and support, residential mobility, illness, learning barriers and temperament, and community violence. ...the study notes that even when fees are discussed by interviewees, fees as a barrier to access are invariably mentioned in conjunction with school uniforms (Fleisch and Woolman, 2004, p.113).

Citing Porteus (2002), Fleisch and Woolman note that, "[W]hile the study supports the conclusion that poverty impedes some children's access to a basic education, it clearly does not support the conflation of poverty, failure to pay school fees and restricted educational access." (Fleisch and Woolman, 2004, p.114).

This assertion is supported for children aged seven to 18 by data from the Barriers to Education Study. In coding the survey data a complex of factors related to poverty were grouped together and once aggregated comprised the most common reason for leaving school, affecting just over 50% of children

and youths.⁹ These factors included: lack of money for access costs or fees; general financial pressures at home (leading to a decision to leave school to seek work, for example); family responsibilities in the context of low household income (such as having to look after siblings); as well as the vulnerability of poor households to financial and other shocks, such as when family members die or become ill (Strassburg, Meny-Gibert and Russell, 2010a). Poverty was found to be a less prominent driver of school drop-out in the Youth Survey (youths aged 16 to 18), though after teenage pregnancy, factors related to household poverty was the most common set of responses.

The survey results showed that broader access costs such as school uniforms and transport can severely strain poverty-stricken households – uniforms remain a particularly heavy burden (Strassburg *et al.*, 2010b). However, the extent to which transport costs constitute a barrier to access varies across the country. Most learners walk to school (76%) (Strassburg *et al.*, 2010) and there is fairly widespread coverage of schools across the country. Where transport costs contribute to irregular attendance and school drop-out, this is primarily an issue for learners in rural communities especially those in commercial farming areas, where a historical lack of supply of schools, especially secondary schools, persists.¹⁰ Whilst it takes 4.8% and 8.5% of learners in urban informal and formal settlements over half an hour to walk to school respectively, a journey of this length on foot affects 43.5% of children in commercial farming areas and 19.5% of children in rural traditional areas (Strassburg *et al.*, 2010b).

The Barriers Study shows that household poverty and the costs of education work in various ways to compel children and youths to leave school, yet school fees may be far less of a culprit than is often assumed. Since the introduction of the no-fees and fees exemption policies, school fees are now low for the majority of children in South Africa. According to the Barriers Study, 50% of learners aged seven to 18 paid less than R50 a year, and just

⁹ It should be noted that results disaggregated by gender showed that pregnancy was the most common reason for young women leaving school. Other factors causing drop out included: feeling disengaged and unstimulated by their schooling, substance abuse, factors associated with being over-age and having repeated a number of times (experience of humiliation by teachers or learners, sense of frustration at having failed again). For a detailed list of the reasons provided for drop out by caregivers and youth, see Strassburg *et al.* (2010b).

¹⁰ Transport costs have significant implications for inequality of access to *good* education given that the large majority of well performing schools in South Africa are those located in middle class areas.

under 40% attended school without paying fees (Strassburg *et al.*, 2010b). Furthermore, less than 1% of caregivers in the Barriers Study reported that their children had been denied access to school because of a failure to pay fees (Strassburg *et al.*, 2010a). At first glance the survey results present a puzzle: given that only 1% of children and youths aged seven to 18 had been denied access to school due to non-payment of fees, why do school fees feature as a prominent catalyst for school drop-out – as shown by responses to open-ended questions on the reasons children and youths left school?

Social exclusion of poor learners in South African schools: preliminary evidence

Whilst the Barriers Study showed that less than 1% of children and youths aged seven to 18 had been denied registration or asked to leave the school due to non-payment of fees or other access costs (including not having the required uniform), data showed that punishment for non-payment of fees was common. A third of learners whose caregivers' had indicated struggling to pay, or not being able to pay fees at all, had had their report card or exam results withheld, and 4% had been prevented from writing exams (Strassburg *et al.*, 2010b). Examples of punishment for non-payment of fees were identified in three of the four communities who partook in the focus group discussion for the Study, and included withholding learners' report cards, refusing to issue learners with textbooks, forcing learners to stand in class, allocating the sometimes few desks in the classroom to those learners whose caregivers had paid fees, threatening learners with expulsion and making caregivers work for the school in lieu of fees (Strassburg *et al.*, 2010b).

In its *Review of the financing, resourcing and costs of education in public schools*, the Department of Education acknowledged that non-payment of fees sometimes resulted in schools acting contrary to human rights obligations:

Poor learners whose parents could not pay school fees have been turned away from school, placed in separate rooms, away from other learners, forced to sit on the floor, named and shamed in school assembly, and so on (Department of Education, 2003, p.54).

Exemption policies or a school's no-fees status are not always made known to caregivers by schools. An officially designated no-fee school in the township of Phagameng in Limpopo, for example, misinformed caregivers that the fees exemption policy only applied to farm schools (Social Surveys, 2007).

Department of Education research also showed that even those learners whose families have been officially exempted from payment have on occasion experienced intimidation and humiliation through comments made by the principal or educators (Department of Education, 2003).

In the Department of Education's view exclusion because of non-payment of school fees affects only a minority of families (as the Social Surveys-CALS data shows): "What the statistics do indicate, however, is that the problem is mainly one of a majority of parents in each school marginalizing a minority" (2003, p.83).

Principals who act to exclude learners who are perceived to reduce the resources (and 'standard of education') available to the school may have the tacit support of caregivers in the surrounding community via the School Governing Body (SGB).¹¹ Caregivers from low income households in Phagameng and Thembelihle, areas in which focus group discussions were conducted for the Barriers Study, felt marginalised from actively engaging with the SGB. An educator in a school based in Phagameng for example, commented that SGB meetings and other educator-caregiver forums were conducted in English, which many of the Sipedi speaking caregivers (the large majority) did not sufficiently understand. This limited the active participation of caregivers who were more likely to be from less educated and poorer households (Social Surveys, 2007).

Rather than directly excluding children from attendance due to non payment of fees (survey results show instances of direct exclusion are low), pressure was applied to households and children which, in the context of a broad set of pressures created by household and community poverty, created disincentives to remaining in school.

Furthermore, some learners from poor and low-income households who participated in our focus group discussions felt acutely conscious of their poverty, with consequences for school attendance. Conforming is vital for many teenagers, and factors which make them feel different may cause stress and anxiety. Most youths in Thembelihle attend school in the higher-income area of Lenasia. Focus group participants spoke of their sense of inadequacy

¹¹ All government schools in South Africa are managed by the school's School Governing Body (SGB). This body comprises representatives of teachers and parents/caregivers, who are jointly responsible for school governance (with the exception of issues related to the professional management of staff).

because they could not afford the things their classmates could, or because they felt they lacked status in the eyes of their peers for coming from poorly resourced homes. A young woman from Thembelihle explained that, “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.” (Strassburg *et al.*, 2010).

The following quote is from another young woman in Thembelihle who attended school in Lenasia before dropping out of school:

. . .like when you are in a big family and the mother can’t give everyone the attention they need. She only concentrates on the youngest ones and forgets about you, and if you ask her for something regarding your school she won’t give it to you. . .When you get to school you see that other children have everything and you are the only one who does not have a thing so you end up dropping out of school because you feel like you are the odd one out. Then your mother starts calling you names because you dropped out (Social Surveys, 2007).

The quote points to the compounding effects of a complex set of reasons for the youths’ decision to leave school. Significantly, it highlights that it was the youth’s *experience* of poverty rather than objective economic constraints that saw her choosing to leave school.

Where might issues of social exclusion and the relative experience of poverty be most acute? We suggest that poverty may bite hardest in relation to others – in that where children are equally poor they may be less likely to drop out as a result of poverty than those where there is a greater socio-economic mix. We illustrate this with data from the qualitative component of the Barriers Study.

Doreen is a small village in Limpopo surrounded by commercial farmland. Most households subsist on social grants and the meager income brought in by farm labour. The supply of schools in the area is limited: children from Doreen and the surrounding area have to attend farm schools¹² or leave home

¹² Farm schools are those schools based on privately owned commercial farmland, traditionally located in rural areas where no government schools were provided. According to legislation under the democratic government post 1994, while the farm owner owns the land, the Department of Education has authority over farm schools, and the schools are managed by the school’s School Governing Body (SGB). While the supply of secondary schools which offer tuition up to the end of Grade 12 is generally widespread in South Africa, there are remaining deficiencies of supply in some farming areas (approximately 6% of the country) where farm schools have not historically offered a full secondary education – partly because, under apartheid, this ensured the supply of young labour to farms.

to attend school in the nearest town of Musina. The two local farm schools do not offer education beyond Grades 7 and 9 respectively and few households can afford the cost of supporting a child's attendance at a school away from home. As a result, most children in Doreen do not receive more than a Grade 9 education.

The two farm schools were declared 'No-fees schools' in 2007. Children in Doreen were thus not charged for school fees, but were faced with a range of other access costs, from uniforms and stationery to demands for money for firewood and cleaning of the school. A few children had been temporarily turned away from school for not having the correct uniform. The significance of Doreen is that while all of the households were very poor, and struggled to pay for the access costs just mentioned, children in the Doreen schools had not dropped out of school permanently – remaining in school until Grade 9 (the highest level of tuition offered).

The communities of Phagameng and Thembelihle tell contrasting stories to Doreen. Phagameng is a township adjacent to the town of Modimolle in the Limpopo province. Local schools draw learners from the township and surrounding farming areas. Whilst almost all the children attending Phagameng township schools were from low income households, there was a greater socio-economic mix of learners than found in Doreen – and it is this difference, however small, that is key. Even small differences in household income or socio-economic status can leave learners open to being teased. Some learners living in the informal settlement in Phagameng were singled out by learners from low income households living in the formal township for being 'dirty' and 'poor'.

The majority of learners in Thembelihle, an informal settlement in the Gauteng province, attend schooling in the neighbouring formal settlement of Lenasia with somewhat larger socio-economic mix of learners. Thembelihle learners and caregivers spoke of an acute sense of inadequacy in relation to the wealthier learners and caregivers at the schools they attended in Lenasia, with a caregiver commenting that, "We are regarded as nothing [in the SGB meetings]." (Strassburg *et al.*, 2010).

It is the connection between poverty and agency, a recognition that being marked out as 'poor' leaves you disempowered and unable to participate, that gives the concept of social exclusion its resonance. Poor learners are marginalised particularly in contexts of inequality where institutional and

social processes work in concert to pathologise poverty. The experience of shame at failing to live up to the social and economic norm, on being dependent on those who are paying fees, may leave poor learners (in the 'least-poor' schools) less secure in making claims on educational access. Ironically, in a community or school where no caregivers can afford to pay fees or other access costs, access to education may be better protected.

The evidence at this stage on the effects of relative poverty and social exclusion on access are not conclusive and the extent of learners affected needs to be tested via survey research, but we suggest this is an interesting area for further investigation. Social exclusion helps extend our understanding of poverty from absolute deprivation as a reason for drop-out to include a focus on the terms of inclusion into schools and the way in which inequality functions as an exclusionary device. This requires a far more considered exploration of the historical legacies and cultural make-up of the school as an institution and how it is implicated in perpetuating (rather than alleviating) socio-economic inequality. As the Nelson Mandela Foundation study points out

Far from being safe havens, schools can be places of intolerance and violation of rights. Together, these [direct and indirect] costs make schools hard to access. Being hard to access, they also do not meet the vital and social needs that enable children to live their lives to the full (NMF, 2005, p.45).

The strength of the literature on relative poverty and social exclusion is that it places the child's and caregiver's lived experience of school at centre stage. It urges a focus on understanding the experience of poverty in relation to others (other learners, the surrounding community and so on) rather than simply the absolute costs of education. In the context of pro-poor policies which have reduced the cost of school attendance in South Africa, the concept of social exclusion may be key to understanding why the 'costs of education' continues to feature as a reason for drop-out in national surveys. In addition, the literature on relative poverty and social exclusion shifts our focus from poverty as a phenomenon located in the household to a barrier exacerbated, or in some cases even caused, by processes in the classroom, playground and staff room.

Conclusion

Poverty remains a factor in school drop-out despite pro-poor policies to address barriers to access. This is partly because poor learners continue to be faced with other access costs: uniforms in particular remain a burden for poor households and in some cases a barrier to access (Strassburg *et al.*, 2010a).

Survey results show that very few children and youths aged seven to 18 are now categorically denied access to schools due to non-payment of fees or other access costs, or not having the required uniform. Yet, both fees and access costs remain stated barriers to access for the small proportion of children and youths aged seven to 18 who are out of school. We suggest that a possible reason for this apparent puzzle is that rather than the objective cost of schooling preventing access, it is social exclusion of poor learners – via for example humiliation of poor learners by the school for non- or late payment of school costs, in addition to the youth's relative experience of being poor, that creates a catalyst for leaving, or adds to existing pressures on poor learners at the household level.

This paper has thus presented new evidence on the manner in which poverty creates barriers to access and school completion, and argued that an expanded definition of poverty is needed in exploring poverty as a barrier to school education in South Africa – that of social exclusion and relative poverty.

Unlike absolute poverty's concentration on inputs/resources, an expanded definition of poverty shows the importance of inequality and experience of difference in understanding how poverty impacts on children's access to schooling.

Ironically, South Africa's class-based schooling system may help keep learners in school, given that in schools where learners are equally poor, social exclusion of poor learners is less likely. Whilst these results need to be tested more extensively, the implications for policy are sobering. If, in schools and communities where all children are poor they may be more likely to stay in school, what implications does this have for breaking class and socio-economic boundaries? Are children most vulnerable to dropping out when households display upward mobility of even the smallest kind (in sending their children to schools outside of their immediate community) or where socio-economic difference exists?

What these questions point to, is that greater cognisance needs to be taken of the terms on which children are included in schools. Currently, the decentralised system of school governance gives power to SGBs to develop the mission and vision of the school and, in fee-paying schools, to set the level of fees. Poorer children entering schools face established economic and social power relations to which they have to adapt. Those that do not adjust, experience marginalisation and risk complete exclusion. If we are to take relative poverty seriously (rather than a growing pain that the vulnerable must acclimatise to), then we need to work much harder at inculcating a human rights culture in schools. We do not mean this as a glib and easy policy conclusion. Already some progress has been made in ridding the system of the institutional funding mechanisms that required fee payments (in the poorest three quintiles) and exemptions procedures in fee paying schools have been made more transparent – eliminating direct pressure on parents. But a simple concentration on fees and other access costs will still leave the social pressures of relative poverty, and there will be diminishing returns to the expansion of no-fees schools in South Africa. These are complex, long-term challenges. But they are centrally educational challenges, which is to build an equitable and human rights culture.

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