



INCLUSIVE SOCIETY INSTITUTE

Op-ed

Born free, but not fair: 5 ways we can support SA's teens to stay in school without interventions along their life cycle, kids could well become the "disaffected youth" as early inequality gets compounded from birth, through school, and beyond.

By Beth Vale and Daryl Swanepoel

South African teens are struggling in the mire of intergenerational inequality – and we're not doing enough to help them out of it, especially when it comes to supporting their school education journey.

That's one of the clear messages from the recently released Inclusive Society Institute (ISI) report called "Understanding Youth Inequality". The report, researched and written by Percept, offers a close, and sometimes uncomfortable, look at youth inequality in this country, recognising that development is a cumulative and continuous process. Any meaningful shift in the stark, and long-entrenched inequality will demand that we unlock the social and economic mobility of these youth. A quality high school education is one of the keys to that mobility.

Access to basic education has improved dramatically in South Africa. By the early 1990s, the country had near-universal enrolment rates at primary school level. And yet, only 60% of young people in South Africa make it to Grade 12, and only 40% leave with a matric certificate. This is a major setback for young people, because the higher their levels of education, the more likely they are to find or create work. Evidence suggests that tertiary qualifications, in particular, exponentially increase the chances of being employed. But without recognised school qualifications, many young people will struggle to continue their education.

Some researchers suggest that there are a few primary routes through which young people from low-income households can achieve social mobility and ultimately access the upper end of the labour market: (1) by attending either more-affluent schools or better-performing schools in poor communities; (2) by performing well in Grade 12, despite being in a lower-quality school, and finding the resources to access university; or (3) by entering the labour market at the lower end and progressing upwards.

There are immense challenges entailed in all three paths: from undoing historic inequalities in access to quality education, to reaching and passing matric, to gaining university access, to gaining any momentum in the labour market. On their journey towards quality jobs, most of South Africa's young people face inordinate obstacles to success because, from a very early age, social, economic, political, and environmental conditions are *not* stacked in their favour.

We need to be able to support, prepare and boost young people at key moments over their life-course, so that they approach adulthood ready to contribute to social, economic and civic life. And in doing so, escape long-held patterns of social exclusion and deprivation. We know that South Africa's youth unemployment rates are significantly affected by high levels of early school-leaving which translates into low access to post-secondary education, and ultimately higher levels of unemployment.

But rather than being a once-off event, school dropout is a process, propelled by a range of multi-layered factors in young people's schools, homes and communities that serve to either push or pull them from school. School dropout usually comes after years of effort and grade repetition.

Researchers and campaigners - like Zero Dropout and Youth Capital, both of which are national campaigns working to change the odds for young people - are showing us the need to recognise dropout as a national problem. It's one that demands urgent efforts at the school, community, provincial, and national level. They've identified five steps we can take to ensure adolescents are supported to stay in school.

1. Implement early warning systems. For young people to reap the benefits of basic education, they must be supported to complete their schooling. This starts by developing and supporting thoughtful dropout-prevention programmes. Research suggests that three indices are critical to identify early signs of disengagement: academic performance, behaviour change, and chronic absenteeism. Documenting and tracking these early warning signs can help to trigger support to absent learners before they drop out.

2. Open access to psychosocial support. Many South African children face trauma, violence, loss, hardship, poor living conditions, and limited access to services, impacting their mental health, academic performance, and ability to finish school. Evidence from South African longitudinal research shows mental illness leads to lower secondary completion and employment, and more psychological distress. Psychosocial support should include role modelling, mentoring, counselling, life-skills training, and referral to professional services, triggered by early warning systems.

3. Schools must implement national policy by supporting pregnant learners and young mothers to stay in school. Pregnant learners and new young mothers face challenges that disrupt their learning, such as school leave for antenatal visits and postnatal care, stigma and bullying, financial pressure in the family, and lack of support. Policy must support learners to stay in school and young mothers to return to school as soon as possible after giving birth. However, the implementation of national policy has varied across schools and provinces, with some places ignoring policy in favour of expelling pregnant learners.

4. Support alternative pathways to a matric qualification. Recent research suggests that, at any given time, there are as many as a quarter of a million young people pursuing a matric outside the full-time school system - a third of the annual matric cohort. Government must expand and support these alternative routes to a matric qualification, which include the National Senior Certificate, the Senior Certificate and the National Senior Certificate for Adults. As a first principle, this should include easily accessible application information, academic resources, and support services that help young people navigate second-chance matric qualifications.

5. Improve TVET education in terms of access and quality. Fewer than two in 10 young people starting Grade 1 will attend university, due to a lack of affordability and support. Six out of 10 young people will not receive a matric certificate and will need to find pathways to further education where this is not a requirement. To increase tertiary education, access to quality Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVETs) must be increased, offering targeted skills training and workplace-based learning. High schools should educate Grade 8 and 9 learners on all learning pathways, including TVETs. The Department of Basic Education introduced the General Education Certificate, which offers hope for a national qualification for Grade 9 graduates, but must ensure it is recognised by employers and tertiary institutions.

To curb inequality, our focus must be on supporting young people's livelihoods in ways that break intergenerational cycles of inequality. If we fail to support young people in their early lives, inequalities only widen as they grow older. It will take an urgent, society-wide and government-supported response to help them from when they are born, right through school, and into the job market.

This article draws on the content of the recently published Inclusive Society Institute report under the title 'Understanding Youth Inequality'. Dr Beth Vale is an applied anthropologist, public health specialist, and social development consultant at Percept. Daryl Swanepoel is the CEO of the Inclusive Society Institute.

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