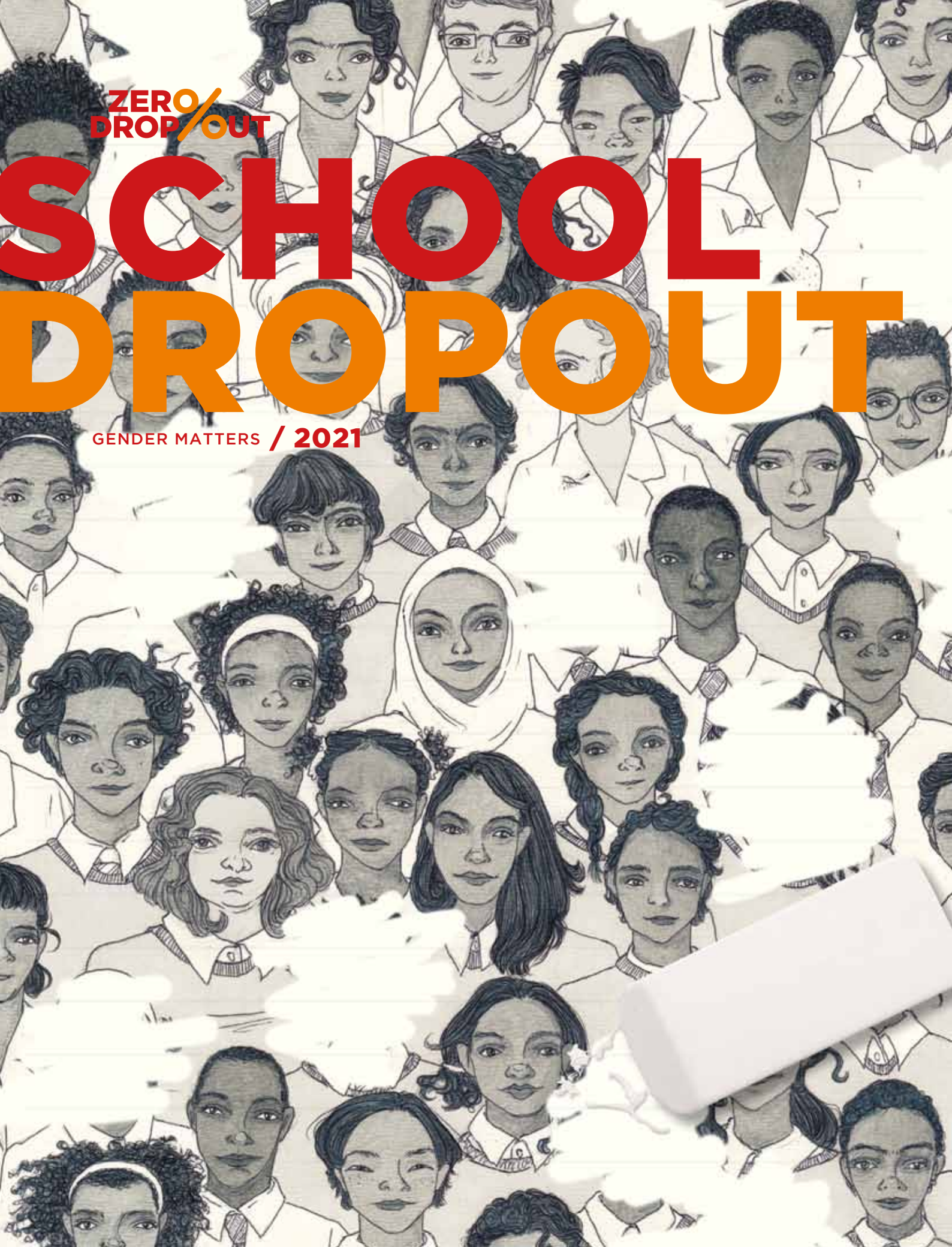
ZERO DROP OUT

SCHOOL DROPOUT

GENDER MATTERS / 2021



WHAT'S THE STORY?

While learners start out on relatively equal footing in terms of school enrolment, their journeys through school are shaped by gendered assumptions, barriers and expectations. These intersect with other social and economic inequalities to unsteady learners' education, deepen their disengagement from school, and limit their chances of further study or employment.

Supporting and nurturing learners to stay in, and succeed at school, will require an enabling dropout prevention plan that is responsive to the gender inequalities and stereotypes that shape their learning lives at home, school and in their neighbourhoods. Only then will our learners get the targeted support they need.

We need an intersectional approach to gender and schooling – one that understands how learners' different identities and realities work together in shaping their journey through school, and their experiences of discrimination and privilege.

This publication explores how gender intersects with other social inequalities to shape learners' disengagement from school. By drawing on new research together with lessons from the Zero Dropout Campaign's implementing partners, it aims to inform emerging best practice in gender-responsive dropout prevention, while being cautious not to re-inscribe gender stereotypes that might be harmful or limiting.

ZERO DROPOUT

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This publication is an invitation to co-create gender-responsive dropout prevention in schools.

You will find resources to use and questions to think through.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

CISGENDER: A person whose gender identity corresponds to the sex they were assigned at birth.

GENDER: The social attributes, roles and opportunities associated with being male or female, which shape relationships and inequalities between women, men and gender non-conforming people. These attributes, opportunities and relationships are socially constructed and are learned through socialisation. *See more on page 12*.

GENDERED: Reflecting or involving gender differences or stereotypical gender roles.

GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE: Violence against someone based on gender discrimination, gender role expectations and/or gender stereotypes; or based on the differential power status linked to gender that results in, or is likely to result in physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering.

GENDER BINARY: A system of gender classification in which all people are categorised as either male or female, man or woman.

GENDER DIVERSITY: A broad term used to describe gender identities that demonstrate a diversity of expression beyond the binary framework of male and female. Gender diversity is about acknowledging and respecting that there are many ways to identify outside of the binary system.

GENDER EQUITY: Just and equal treatment of people of all genders, including equal treatment or differential treatment to redress imbalances in rights, benefits, obligations and opportunities.

GENDER-INTEGRATED APPROACHES respond to gender differences and inequalities at every level of a project or system, from planning and policy development, to programming and monitoring.

GENDER-TARGETED APPROACHES focus specifically on addressing the barriers learners face to their education because of their gender, e.g. gender-based enrolment quotas. This is contrasted with, but can also run alongside gender-integrated approaches, which identify and respond to gender considerations at a systemic level.

GENDER NON-CONFORMITY/NON-CONFORMING: People who do not conform to either of the binary gender definitions of male or female, as well as those whose gender expression may differ from standard or imposed gender norms.

GENDER PARITY: A measure that reports the distribution or representation of men relative to women, girls relative to boys. Gender parity is also referred to as the sex ratio, and usually reports on the basis of a gender binary. Although gender parity might be used as one of the metrics for gender equity, it is not the same as gender equity. While gender parity is a purely descriptive measure, gender equity entails questions of justice.

GENDER SPECTRUM: The idea that there are many gender identities (female, male, transgender, non-binary, etc.). There are also a range of gender expressions, or ways in which people externally communicate their gender identity to others through behaviour, clothing, haircut, voice and other forms of presentation. Gender expression may or may not conform to common expectations around one's gender identity.

INTERSECTIONAL: A way of understanding how people's social and political identities (including race, sexuality, gender, origin, economic status, ability, etc.) combine to create different types of discrimination and privilege.

INTERSEX: People who are born with sex characteristics (including genitals, gonads and chromosome patterns) that do not fit typical binary notions of male or female bodies.

SCHOOL DROPOUT: Also known as early 'withdrawal' or 'attrition', dropout is leaving the schooling system without obtaining a minimum credential. A learner in South Africa is therefore considered to have dropped out if they leave school before they obtain a National Senior Certificate (NSC) in Grade 12 or equivalent certificate such as the NC(V) or NQF Level 4 (from a post-schooling education and training institution).

SCHOOL-RELATED GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE (SRGBV): Acts or threats of sexual, physical or psychological violence occurring in and around schools, perpetrated as a result of gender norms and stereotypes, and enforced by unequal power dynamics.[1]

SEX: Biological and physiological characteristics (genetic, endocrine and anatomical) used to categorise people as members of either the male or female population.

NATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORK (NQF): This integrated framework awards registered learners with national accreditation based on their skills and knowledge. The NQF is made up of 10 levels that fall within three bands: the General Education and Training (GET), the Further Education and Training (FET) band and Higher Education. A matric, or qualifications of a similar level, is classed as NQF 4.

TRANS/TRANSGENDER: A person whose gender identity differs from the sex they were assigned at birth. Transgender people may identify as male, female or gender non-conforming; and can also be of any sexuality, including heterosexual, homosexual or pansexual.

QUEER: While 'queer' means different things to different people, it has been broadly reclaimed to describe those whose sexual and gender identities exist outside the bounds of heterosexuality, cisgender identification and the gender binary.

QUINTILE: South African schools are divided into quintiles based on the socio-economic profile of the community in which they are located. Quintile 1 schools are located in the poorest communities, while quintile 5 schools are in the wealthiest. Funding allocations differ across quintiles.

ACRONYMS

CAP	Community Action Partnership
CYCW	Child and Youth Care Worker
DBE	Department of Basic Education
DSD	Department of Social Development
EWS	Early Warning System
FET	Further Education and Training
GBV	Gender-based Violence
GEC	General Education Certificate
LGBTQI+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex and others who identify outside the bounds of heterosexuality, the gender binary or cisgender expression
KDG	Khula Development Group
LSA	Learner Support Agent
NACCW	National Association of Child Care Workers
NIDS-CRAM	National Income Dynamics Study - Coronavirus Rapid Mobile Survey
NQF	National Qualifications Framework
MDO	Masibumbane Development Organisation
ReSEP	Research on Socio-Economic Policy
RCL	Representative Council of Learners
PIRLS	Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS)
SAPS	South African Police Service
SBST	School-based Support Team
SGB	School Governing Body
SMT	School Management Team
SRGBV	School-related Gender-based Violence
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths
TVET	Technical and Vocational Education and Training

"Girls' successes in education in the last decade do not come at the expense of boys; neither do boys' successes come at the expense of girls' successes."

Guidance for developing gender-responsive education sector plans by The Global Partnership for Education, 2017.

FOREWORD/

REIMAGINING A SCHOOLING CULTURE OF CARE

Since the onset of the Covid-19 crisis, there have been renewed calls to reimagine education. In doing so, we must begin to engage with school dropout as a complex gendered phenomenon. Reimagining education requires us to shed unhelpful categories and seek new and inclusive frameworks, categories and ways of thinking, as we make sense of, and tackle the country's school dropout crisis.

PROF. SHAFIKA ISAACS
Associate Professor of Practice, University of Johannesburg

Notes:

"Countless children and youth do not experience their lives as boy or girl; instead, they identify as non-binary on a spectrum of genders.

Gender (as a social construct) intersects with interrelated constructs, such as socio-economic status, language, race, geography, ability and age."

Firstly, as the Zero Dropout Campaign shows, school dropout is not a once-off event marked by a child leaving school. Rather, it is a gradual process of becoming vulnerable that takes many forms, including not learning, not performing academically, being disengaged, being depressed, being hungry, falling pregnant, and eventually leaving school altogether. Preventing school dropout, therefore, means tackling the process of disengagement systemically.

Secondly, approaching the gendered dimension of dropout as simply being the difference between girl versus boy is limiting. It invites binary thinking that creates stereotypical expectations and clear-cut simplistic answers. Binary thinking is unhelpful when trying to understand and tackle a complex systemic challenge like dropout. While many may disagree, countless children and youth do not experience their lives as boy or girl; instead, they identify as non-binary, on a spectrum of genders. Yet, identifying as non-binary often leads to stigmatisation, bullying and ostracisation. This means that we need to be open to varied forms of gender inequality and discrimination in our attempts to tackle the gendered nature of school dropout.

Our education programmes need to create enabling, safe and supportive environments for all genders and be nuanced when it comes to providing differential support to the most vulnerable.

Thirdly, gender (as a social construct) intersects with interrelated constructs, such as socio-economic status, language, race, geography, ability and age. In other words, boy children who drop out of school are likely to also be black, from poor families, speak more than one African language, live in homes where caring adults may be unemployed or live on social grants, live in an informal settlement, or attend a school where there are not enough teachers and facilities to support learning. Framing gender as 'intersectional' to a range of systemic inequalities allows us to both isolate and intersect our strategies to address the dropout crisis holistically.

Fourthly, for many children, school is often a refuge – offering them a place to learn, eat, socialise, play sports and be safe. Yet, for many others, neither school nor home provide places of safety and learning. Moreover, as the relationship between schooling and learning begins to shift, partly because of new technology, schooling does not always equate with learning. This means that we need to develop strategies that focus attention on care and support for learning in, and beyond, school.

Finally, school dropout is often portrayed as a measure of a learner's performance, feeding a narrative that positions struggling children as a problem, thereby deepening existing marginalisation, exclusion and injustice. In the popular imagination, a learner who drops out is often thought of as weak, delinquent or lazy. If we are to reimagine education, we need to reframe the language we use to describe and address the problem.

School dropout has multiple adverse consequences – for both the learner and the nation at large – from fewer job opportunities and reduced lifetime earnings, to vulnerability, poverty and poor mental health. Our work is to reimagine and build a schooling system that nurtures our children's talents, potential and transformative agency. This will be possible if we integrate cultures of care, learning and safety in our schools and their relationships to homes and communities.

Regardless of their gender, race or socio-economic background, nearly all South African children enrol in primary school,[2] but less than half will leave with a matric certificate.[3]

Without a matric qualification, young people often get stuck, cut off from many of the pathways to tertiary education, employment and higher earnings.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Despite almost all children enrolling in Grade 1, the journey to school completion is often shaky and uneven, paved with obstacles and setbacks that work to unsteady learners, ultimately pushing or pulling them away from school. In this publication, these are referred to as disruptions to education. Rather than being supported to complete their schooling, most learners in under-resourced communities get stuck in cycles of grade repetition, or withdraw from school altogether. Among learners in Grades 10-12, approximately 20% are three or more years over-age, having repeated grades.[4] Forty percent of those who start school will never make it to Grade 12.[5]

National survey data show that the Covid-19 pandemic has only amplified disruptions to education. Beginning with its first report in June 2020, South Africa's largest household survey — the National Income Dynamics Study – Coronavirus Rapid Mobile Survey (NIDS-CRAM)[6] — has consistently demonstrated deepening learning losses, reduced access to school meals and learner disengagement from school since the start of the pandemic.

As learners make their way through school, those whose homes, schools and neighbourhoods are supportive and well-resourced have the odds in their favour. Most South African learners, however, have the odds stacked against them. Among the many social, psychological and economic factors that disrupt learners' journeys through school is their gender. In South Africa, gender makes little difference as to whether a child enrols in school. The path to school completion is mapped differently for boys and girls, however, shaped by gendered rules, barriers and expectations that disrupt young people's educational journeys in unique ways. These intersect with other social and economic inequalities to deepen their disengagement from school.

If we are to steady learners on their journey to school completion, and support them, we need a dropout prevention plan that is responsive to the gender inequalities and stereotypes that shape learners' homes, schools and neighbourhoods. Only then will our learners get the targeted support they need.

Zero Dropout is a national advocacy campaign promoting evidence-based approaches to preventing school dropout. The campaign supports learner tracking and monitoring; collaborates with non-profits to test intervention models; and offers research-driven recommendations for policy and programming.

This publication explores how gender intersects with other social inequalities to shape learners' disengagement from school, with the understanding that disengagement is a known precursor to dropout. By drawing data and new research together with lessons from the Zero Dropout Campaign's implementing partners, it aims to inform emerging best practice in gender-responsive dropout prevention. Rather than offering a one-size-fits-all solution for integrating gender-responsiveness into schooling, this publication draws emerging research into conversation with the experience of learners and practitioners, providing questions for education role-players to think through, and resources to guide them. These tools can help to tailor dropout prevention plans that are not only gender-responsive, but also attuned to the unique circumstances of learners, schools and communities.

As we design and implement gender-responsive interventions in schools, it is important that we work to dismantle gender stereotypes, rather than reinforcing them. While this publication gestures towards specific gendered disruptions that boys and girls face in completing their education, it does not intend to box learners' needs, experiences and desires based on their gender.

Far from reducing learners to their gender, effective gender programming should expand how learners of all genders view and experience the opportunities available to them, and offer a vibrant and safe learning environment for all.

Gender-responsive dropout prevention must break down gender stereotypes, not repeat them. This publication describes disruptions that girls and boys face at school, although this does not mean we should box learners' needs and aspirations based on their gender.

RETHINK

GENDER IS A SOCIAL CONSTRUCT

Gender refers to the roles, norms and behaviours that society attaches to being a woman or man, girl or boy, or to being non-binary. Ideas about gender differ across societies and cultures, and can change over time.

Gender can interact with, but is not the same as biological sex. How people experience their gender identity can differ from their assigned sex at birth. Although gender identification is often constructed as binary – man or woman – it is now widely acknowledged to be a fluid spectrum. This means that gender is not fixed, and that there are many gender identities between and outside the categories of 'man' and 'woman'.

Gender is distinct from sexual orientation, although sexual and romantic relationships may determine whether a person conforms to dominant gender norms. South African schools and government departments are slowly reviewing their guidelines to be more inclusive of queer, trans, gender diverse and non-binary learners.

Gender is often constructed hierarchically, producing and compounding socio-economic inequalities by empowering and condoning some gender expressions over others. Imposed norms for 'men' and 'women' can shape young people's livelihoods and life chances, and expose them to gendered violence and vulnerabilities.

Often, when looking at gender, the focus tends to be on women and girls, whose access to education is regularly threatened by gender-based violence (GBV), as well as social and economic marginalisation. But, there is also growing concern about underperformance and high dropout rates among boys, as well as discrimination and exclusion experienced by non-binary and gender diverse learners.

Even though much of the available gender statistics surfaced in this publication report on the basis of a gender binary – boys and girls (often presumed to be cisgender*) – it should in no way deflect attention from the varied challenges suffered by trans, queer, gender diverse and non-binary learners.

Moreover, while gender is the primary focus of this publication, it should never be thought of in isolation. A person's gender combines with other social, economic and psychological factors, making it challenging for them to stay in, and succeed at, school.

We need an intersectional approach to gender and schooling – one that understands how learners' different identities and realities work together in shaping their journey through school, as well as their experiences of discrimination and privilege. Gender considerations should be integrated into every aspect of our dropout prevention strategies from teaching, curricula and learner tracking; to school safety and psychosocial support. %

**A person is considered cisgender when the gender with which they identify matches the sex they were assigned at birth.*

The Genderbread Person

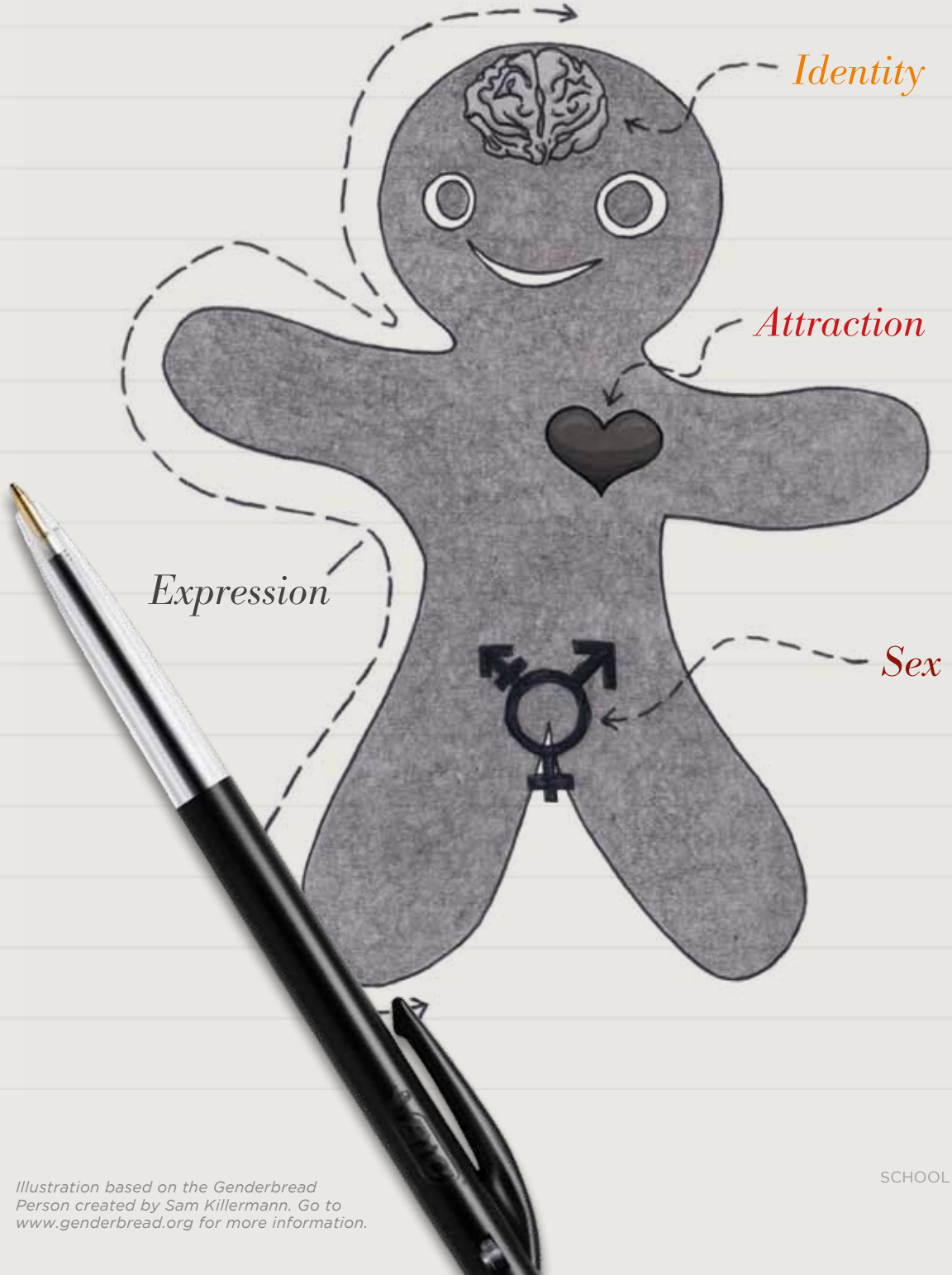


Illustration based on the Genderbread Person created by Sam Killermann. Go to www.genderbread.org for more information.

SECTION/1

THE GLOBAL PICTURE

This section compares and contrasts available data from various parts of the world to provide an overview of gendered disruptions to education.

Although progress has been slow, equality in access to education for boys and girls is improving around the world. Over the past 50 years, primary school enrolment among girls has grown by 24%, shrinking the gender gap by 12%.[7]

Yet, among children of primary school age worldwide, there are still 5.5 million more girls out of school than boys.[8] In Sub-Saharan Africa, nearly one in four girls of primary school age is out of school, compared to one in five boys in the same age range.[9]

Interestingly, the picture begins to change as girls and boys progress through school. Even though fewer girls worldwide enrol in school, they quickly find their footing, outperforming boys in the classroom. In most places, this has meant that once girls enrol in school, they are more likely to advance to, and complete, their secondary education.[10] **In 1998, there were more girls of secondary school age out of school than boys. Today, the opposite is true.**[11]

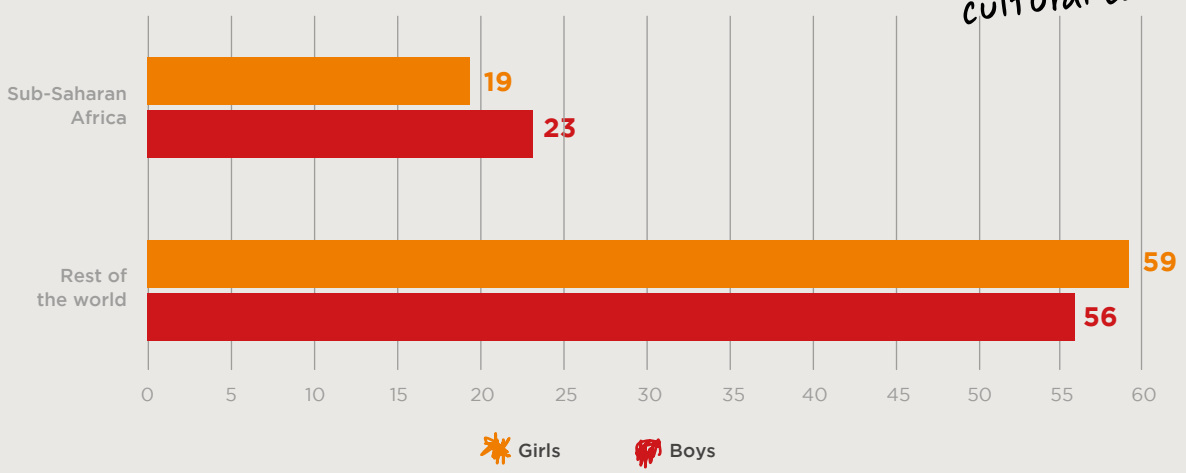
While gender inequalities are greater in secondary school enrolment, trends vary across countries. Despite girls, on average, having better access to secondary education than boys, this secondary school advantage has not materialised for girls in Sub-Saharan Africa, who continue to face severe disruptions to their education. **Instead, Sub-Saharan Africa continues to reflect the world's largest gender gaps in secondary school enrolment, at the expense of girls.**

So, what does this tell us about the experiences of boys and girls from enrolment to school completion? How are gender roles, expectations and burdens shaping the way boys and girls enrol and participate in school, and the disruptions they face to their formal education? And, what might regional differences in the relationship between gender and school completion tell us about how gender intersects with socio-economic and political circumstances?

These questions are explored in more detail in this section.

Things to consider: gender + socio-economic circumstances + regional political and cultural considerations.

Fig.1 **GLOBAL UPPER SECONDARY SCHOOL COMPLETION RATES BY GENDER, 2019**



Available UNICEF datasets show that globally, girls are more likely than boys to complete their secondary school education. But the reverse is true in Sub-Saharan Africa, where girls are at a disadvantage.[12]

GENDERED DISRUPTIONS TO EDUCATION GLOBALLY

DISRUPTIONS AT HOME

HOUSEHOLD RESPONSIBILITIES

Excessive household responsibilities can leave learners with little time for schoolwork and shift their priorities away from the classroom.

GENDER MATTERS: Because of stereotypical gender roles that position men as household providers, boys are often under greater pressure than girls to earn an income. During times of financial strain, some households might encourage boys to leave school and look for work. Others may deal with financial pressures by prioritising boys' education over girls', contributing to poorer rates of enrolment among girls in resource-poor countries. While boys might face greater pressure to look for work, or increase their earning potential, girls often face a greater burden of domestic chores, which (in many places) are considered women's work. From an early age, girls are given more household chores than boys, leaving them with less time for schoolwork and play. In five out of six countries across the world, girls (aged 10-14) are more likely to report spending over 20 hours each week on household chores.[13]

PREGNANCY

While the adolescent birth rate in Sub-Saharan Africa has been steadily declining,[14] it remains the highest in the world, and is more than double the average of low- and middle-income countries.[15]

GENDER MATTERS: For many girls and young women across the world, an unintended pregnancy means social stigma and isolation, along with major disruptions to schooling. Meanwhile, boys who become parents experience far less blame or upheaval. While there has been significant research on teenage pregnancy in South Africa, its focus has been almost exclusively on teenage mothers. Over the years, statistics have shown high rates of teenage pregnancy among young women, but have not provided nationally-representative data on teenage fathers.[16] While expectant teenage fathers may not face the same disruptions to schooling as pregnant learners, existing studies[17] show that young fathers also face social stigma from friends and family, and feel pressure to support their children financially. Research[18] also suggests a link between the emotional support teenage fathers receive from their families and the level of contact they have with their own children. Since most teenage fathers do not live with, and cannot financially provide for their children, they do not fit stereotypical constructions of fatherhood. If we want to support fathering learners and their children, while also promoting gender equity, their experiences need to be thoughtfully incorporated into policy and programming.

CHILD MARRIAGE

37% of women (aged 20-24) in Sub-Saharan Africa were first married before the age of 18.[19] Early marriage can disrupt young women's education by drawing them into wifely (and at times motherly) duties and exposing them to the risk of domestic abuse.

GENDER MATTERS: Child marriage is often a feature of deeply-rooted gender inequality. Girls are six times more likely to be affected by child marriage than boys.[20]

DISRUPTIONS AT SCHOOL

ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

Globally, falling behind and repeating grades are precursors to disengagement and dropout. In most countries, girls outperform boys academically. As boys move through the schooling system, their academic disadvantage only deepens, contributing to grade repetition and disengagement.

GENDER MATTERS: While girls generally outperform boys at both school and university, this has not translated into improved job prospects. Worldwide, nearly one in four girls aged 15-19 years is neither in education, employment nor training, compared to one in 10 boys of the same age.[21] This suggests that, even at a young age, girls struggle to leverage their qualifications for further education and employment, most likely because of gender discrimination in the labour market.[22]

ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT APTITUDE

Expectations about the academic performance of boys and girls are often gendered.

GENDER MATTERS: Across the world, adolescent girls outperform boys in reading, but maths performance is more varied. Often, lower expectations of girls' performance in science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) subjects can become a barrier to their learning and future employment.[23] Similarly, gender stereotypes might limit the exposure and encouragement boys receive in Humanities or Social Science subjects, for which some may have an aptitude. In South Africa, for example, the Humanities and Social Sciences saw among the highest gender disparities in 2017 university enrolment: 63% of students enrolled in Humanities and Social Sciences degrees were women.[24]

Notes:

DISCIPLINARY CLIMATE

When teachers use aggression, shaming or violence as forms of punishment, learners become afraid to go to school, and can also experience long-lasting physical and psychological damage.

GENDER MATTERS: In many places, boys are stereotyped as disruptive, which tends to lead to punishment that keeps them from the classroom.[25] Missing class as part of punishment can mean that boys lose learning time, making it more likely that they will fall behind academically, repeat grades and disengage from school. While there is significant variation across countries, boys are also more likely, on average, to experience corporal punishment at school.[26] This is related to widespread associations between violence and a form of masculinity that normalises and reinforces the violence perpetrated, and experienced, by boys.[27]

POOR ACCESS TO SANITATION FACILITIES AND MENSTRUAL PRODUCTS

While there are cultural, socio-economic and geographic differences in the ways that menstruation is experienced and interpreted, many learners who attend school while menstruating face some level of physical, social and material obstacle. Inadequate sanitation facilities and poor access to menstrual products can restrict the freedom and comfort of learners who menstruate, and make them a target for bullying, all of which can keep them from school.

GENDER MATTERS: Many school-going girls across the world face harassment and stigma during menstruation; to avoid this, some may choose to stay home, missing important schoolwork. Transmen and non-binary learners who menstruate face the added stigma of their marginalised gender identity, which can also prevent them from accessing the facilities and menstrual hygiene products they need.

Explained...

*The **gender binary** is a system of gender classification in which all people are categorised as either male or female, man or woman. The gender identities and expressions of non-binary people do not sit neatly within the categories of 'man' and 'woman'.*

DISRUPTIONS IN THE NEIGHBOURHOOD

SEXUAL VIOLENCE

Sexual violence can happen at home, at school, or in learners' neighbourhoods. When learners experience sexual violence, the effects are long term, and increase the risk of HIV, unintended pregnancy, substance abuse and depression.[28] All of these can unsteady learners on their course to school completion, making it difficult to stay on track.

GENDER MATTERS: Sexual violence is often intensely gendered. Girls are most vulnerable to sexual violence and harassment, both from teachers and classmates.[29] They are also most likely to be kept from school because families are concerned for their safety.[30]

WAR, CONFLICT AND SOCIAL UPHEAVAL

Unrest, civil war, rebellions and neighbourhood violence can radically destabilise learners' education.

GENDER MATTERS: Rates of teenage pregnancy peak during periods of social, political and economic disruption. This is because women's vulnerability to sexual violence, sexual exploitation and early marriage is amplified during times of unrest. While pregnancy and sexual exploitation can keep girls from school during times of upheaval, boys are more likely to be recruited into the army or into warring factions.[31] This, in combination with bullying and corporal punishment, means that violence can both push and pull learners away from school.

SUBSTANCE ABUSE

Learners who use drugs and alcohol are reported to be less motivated, less engaged in their schoolwork, and more likely to be absent from school. Substance abuse is also often associated with mental health challenges. Together, substance abuse and mental illness can affect learners' educational performance and pull them from school.[32]

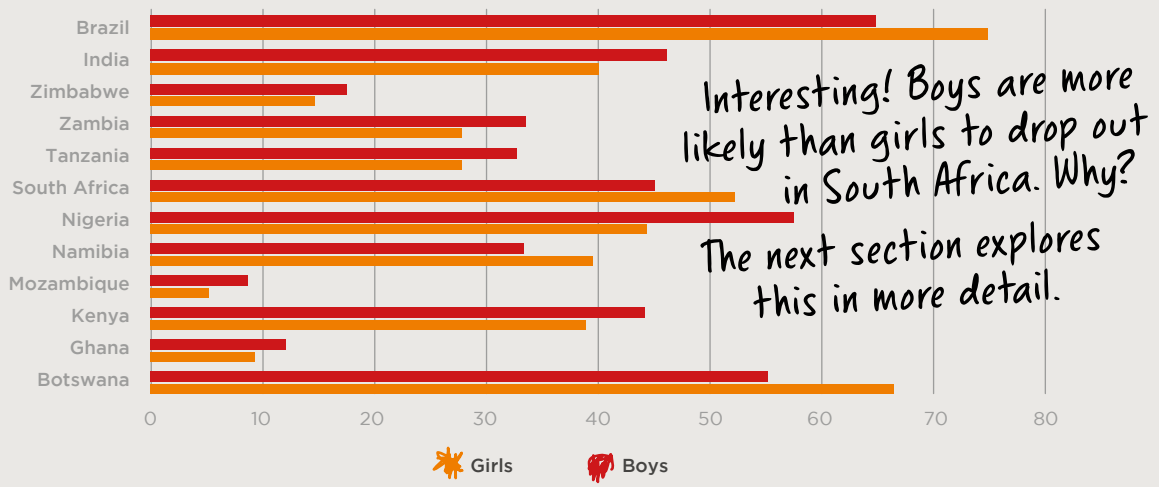
GENDER MATTERS: Globally, substance abuse is more prevalent in boys than girls,[33] related to gender stereotypes that associate risk-taking and using substances with masculinity and male bonding.

RETHINK

AVAILABLE DATA SUGGESTS THAT IN SOUTH AFRICA, GIRLS ARE MORE LIKELY TO LEAVE SCHOOL WITH A MATRIC CERTIFICATE THAN BOYS.

This suggests that local trends in school completion for boys and girls differ from the wider Sub-Saharan African region, where girls are usually less likely to finish school than their male counterparts (as shown in this section). The relationship between gender and dropout in South Africa appears to diverge from regional trends, signalling there may be unexplored challenges for boys locally. Therefore, gender-responsive approaches to dropout in the South African context may need to expand beyond the girl child to include the varied challenges of boys and those who do not conform to the gender binary.

Fig.2 **COMPARATIVE HIGH SCHOOL COMPLETION RATES BY GENDER, 2019**



UNICEF data show that gendered trends in school completion are driven by complex socio-economic and cultural dynamics, which vary from country to country. For example, in South Africa, Botswana, Brazil and Namibia, boys are at higher risk of dropout; while in India, Nigeria and Kenya, girls are most vulnerable to dropout.[34]

SECTION/2

THE LOCAL PICTURE

The link between gendered disruptions and dropout in South Africa.

In this section, we explore how gender can shape South African learners' journeys through school, disrupting boys' and girls' education in different ways. We know that dropout is not a once-off event in a young person's life, but is a process of disengagement (or disconnection from schooling and learning). Learners are steadily pushed and pulled away from school, as they wrestle a range of challenges in their homes, neighbourhoods and learning environments.

In South Africa, of the 100 learners who start school in Grade 1, only 37% will reach and pass their matric examinations.[35] While all learners are at risk of dropout if they become disengaged over a long period, their pathways through schooling are gendered.

Too often, a learner's gender can shape the obstacles and setbacks they face to their education; a young person's race, class and individual characteristics (such as sexual orientation or disability) also intersect with gender in ways that impact their relationship with schooling.

While there are many factors working to disrupt young people's schooling – including household income, teacher absenteeism and access to learning resources – this section explores how these factors may be complicated or compounded by gender. We explore gendered disruptions to schooling in the home, school and neighbourhood, as well as how gender inequality is reinforced at a policy level. In all these spheres of young people's lives, there are gendered expectations, pressures and stereotypes that unsteady them on their path to school completion.

Throughout this section, we connect research and lived experience, drawing from Anthea and Jabulani's stories, as well as the work and first-hand accounts of the Zero Dropout Campaign's implementing partners.

Since 2017, the Zero Dropout Campaign has worked with four NGO implementing partners to roll out dropout prevention strategies in different parts of the country. Through this relationship, the campaign has built a body of knowledge about learner retention. Over the past four years, the Masibumbane Development Organisation (MDO), Khula Development Group (KDG), National Association of Child Care Workers (NACCW) and the Community Action Partnership (CAP) have worked across three provinces to pilot a range of dropout prevention models. These organisations have trained either community workers, interns, mentors or Child and Youth Care Workers (CYCWs) to support learners to stay connected to schooling.

This section also draws on the experiences of the individuals working for the implementing partners to prevent disengagement and dropout in schools.

A TALE OF TWO LEARNERS

Meet Jabulani and Anthea. They are not real people; they are composite characters. Their stories are based on a series of interviews conducted by the Zero Dropout Campaign with learners in the Western Cape and Eastern Cape. Jabulani and Anthea reflect the experiences, hopes and challenges of many young people making their way through the South African schooling system.

Jabulani

Aged 20, Grade 10

Jabulani's 30m² family home in Duncan Village in the Eastern Cape has two rooms painted green. The first is just big enough to fit his mom's prized floral couch, along with a cabinet, stovetop and fridge. In the second, he shares a single bed with his 16-year-old brother, Siya; his mother and youngest brother, Thando, sleep in the double bed just next to them – the one his mom and dad used to share.

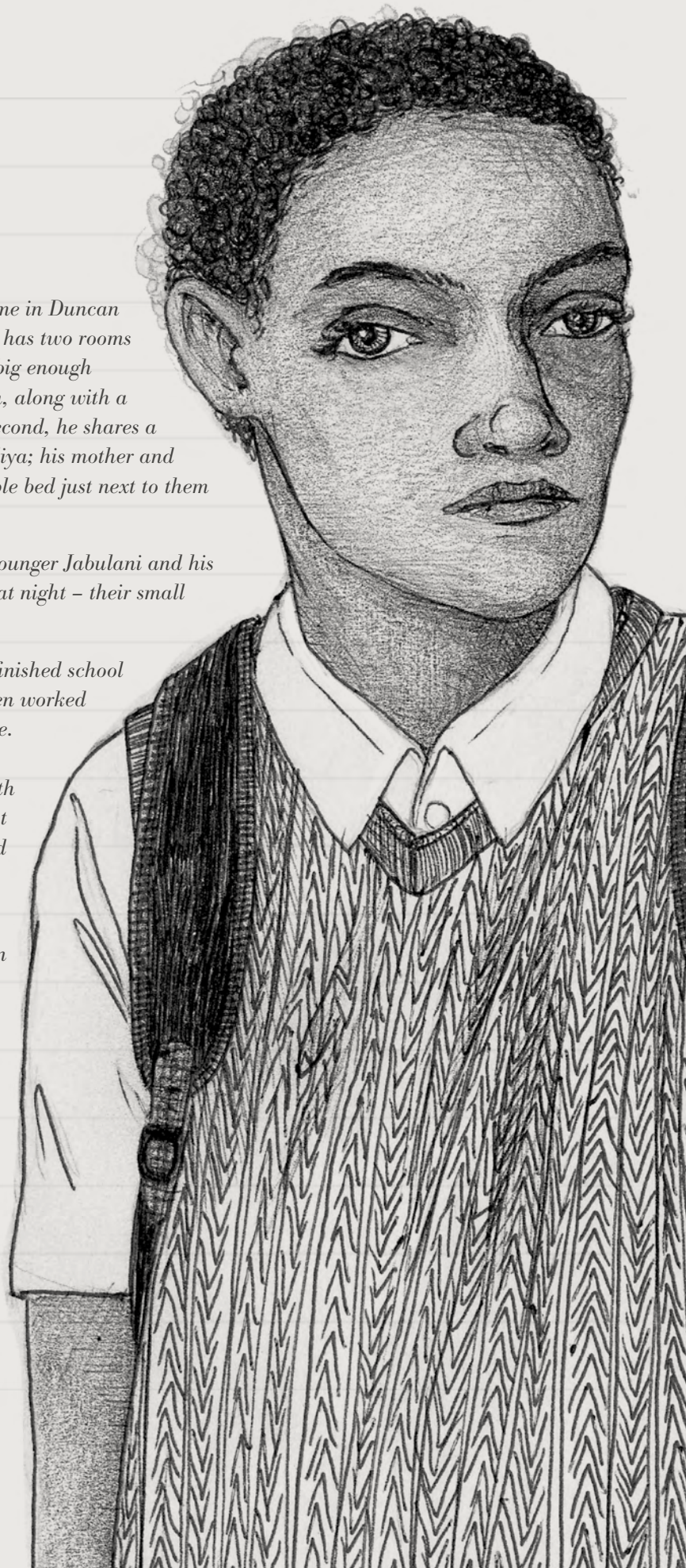
For weeks following their father's death, a much younger Jabulani and his brothers would climb into the bed with their mom at night – their small bodies filling the space where their dad used to lie.

Jabulani was eight when their dad died. His dad finished school in 2001, not long before Jabulani was born. He then worked as a shelf-packer, and later as a cashier at Shoprite. Jabulani remembers his dad always teaching him something new: about how rain was made, or South Africa's Struggle Heroes, or how to signal a taxi. At night, his dad would tell him stories, or they would read together from Jabulani's schoolbooks.

Jabulani's father always said that Jabulani would be the first in his family to go to university. With an education, he believed his son could do anything.

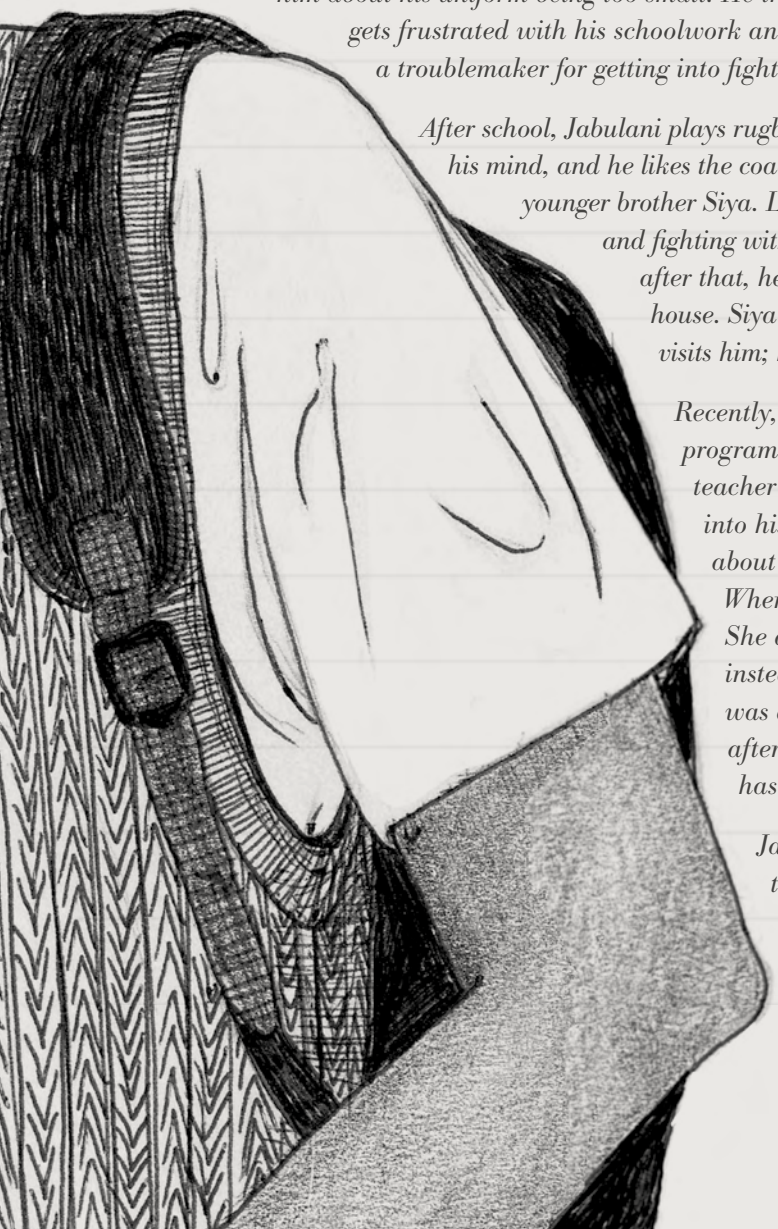
Losing his dad was heartbreaking for Jabulani. It also meant his family struggled financially. As Siya and Thando were still young, his mom couldn't leave home to look for work. Jabulani often felt sad and anxious, and started falling behind in his classwork. He failed Grades 3 and 4.

Jabulani remembers the shame and sadness of watching his friends progress to the next grade, while he was left behind. But he kept going, hoping to make life easier for his mom and his siblings, and to make his dad proud.



Since graduating primary school, Jabulani finds the classwork even more difficult. Grade 9 was his worst year ever. He struggled to keep up, especially in maths, and eventually he was told he had to repeat the year. Jabulani felt helpless and unmotivated: "How had his father ever thought he would make it to university?" His mom still had not found a stable job and Jabulani wondered if he might be better off looking for work. At least then he could take care of himself and help his family. At school, there was no income; all you get is knowledge, but knowledge alone does not buy bread. Although Jabulani was hopeful that the knowledge he gained at school would eventually pay off, he also knew there was no guarantee that life after school would be easy. He thought seriously about dropping out. His mom encouraged him to stay in school.

Now Jabulani is in Grade 10. Guys at school make fun of him because they say he is too old for school and tease him about his uniform being too small. He tries to ignore them, but sometimes gets into fights. He still gets frustrated with his schoolwork and worries that his teachers think he is a bad learner and a troublemaker for getting into fights.



After school, Jabulani plays rugby and soccer. Sport helps him cope with stress and clears his mind, and he likes the coaches. He doesn't want to go down the same road as his younger brother Siya. Last year, Siya started returning home late on weeknights, and fighting with their mom. His friends introduced him to drugs, and soon after that, he dropped out of school. Their mother chased Siya out of the house. Siya now lives in a shack in their grandfather's yard. Jabulani visits him; he's trying to encourage him to go back to school.

Recently, Jabulani's school enrolled him in a mentorship programme to help keep him on track. Once, when there was no teacher in the classroom, Jabulani went to the toilets and ran into his mentor on the way back. They had a short conversation about keeping up with his homework during rugby season. When Jabulani returned to class, the teacher had arrived. She did not want to hear why Jabulani had been missing, and instead sent him straight to the principal's office. Jabulani was angry about getting into trouble, and he missed a whole afternoon of class because of the punishment; but at least he has a mentor he can talk to.

Jabulani still wants to be the first person in his family to go to university. He hopes to study Mechanical Engineering. He believes nothing will stop him from passing matric – not even the fact that he will be much older than many of his classmates when he matriculates. %

Anthea

Aged 21, dropped out of school in Grade 11

Anthea lives in a triple-storey flat in Manenberg, a suburb in Cape Town. Her neighbourhood is notorious for street gangs, who are often in the news for shooting at each other with little concern for bystanders. Anthea's street looks like others on her block: rows of brightly-coloured laundry are hung between staircases and children make trampolines from old mattresses. She shares the flat with her grandmother, mother, uncle, two cousins and her older brother. Neighbours enter and leave their flat as they please, so there is always a lively noise in her home – whether it is dogs barking, families fighting or music blaring from car windows.

Anthea has no space to herself. That's what she liked about going to school. There were quiet corners to be alone in, and a big soccer field where she could play with her friends. Anthea can kick a ball around for hours. She knows she's good at soccer and it makes her feel powerful and alive.

Large parts of Anthea's neighbourhood are run by gangs. Some of her classmates say they are protected by the gangs, but Anthea has always been afraid of them. She learnt that from her mom, who still gets nervous whenever Anthea leaves the house. It's been like that since Anthea was a little girl. When Anthea was a toddler, her family witnessed a shooting on their street. There have been many more shootings since. Throughout her life, Anthea has often been made to stay home, while her older brother visits his friends.

Anthea used to take a taxi to school, but on days when there were shootings or protests, she would stay indoors. As she got older,

she heard stories about women who had been assaulted while using public transport in the evenings. So, Anthea made a point of returning home earlier and earlier. At home, Anthea was given lots of chores, while her brother didn't help much around the house. She helped her mom take care of her grandmother and cousins, and assisted with the cooking and cleaning. During her last few years of primary school, Anthea's uncle started drinking a lot. When he was drunk, he became loud and aggressive, and Anthea found it scary to be around him. With all her responsibilities and the stress of being around her uncle, she started to lose focus.

Things got worse in high school. Anthea stopped going to soccer practice because she didn't feel safe travelling back from school in the late afternoons. Even though her uncle no longer lived with them and her mother got a job, her grandmother was getting older, and Anthea took on even more responsibilities by looking after her cousins.

In Grade 11, two of Anthea's friends dropped out of school. When she called them in the morning to say she was headed to class, they would say she was boring. Eventually, Anthea also dropped out – she wanted to be part of the group. Her mind was no longer in the classroom. Instead, her mind was with her friends; they were an escape from her problems at home and her struggles at school.

When Anthea dropped out, her mom was upset. She couldn't understand why Anthea would give up after so many years of hard work. Anthea and her mom fought a lot. Once, when Anthea was texting, her mom threw her phone across the room, saying her friends were a bad influence.

Three years later, one of Anthea's friends has returned to school. The other is pregnant and says she will never go back. People in the neighbourhood say she is a lost cause. Anthea is still at home, but is trying to stay motivated. She regrets dropping out of school and knows that if she had stayed, she might be qualified and have started a career by now.

Last year, Anthea's uncle had a stroke and needed extra care. She helped her aunt look after him and really enjoyed the work. Her aunt encouraged her to do the Home-based Care Certificate, which Anthea completed last year. Her mom was proud.

On weekends, Anthea goes hiking with young people from her church. She wants to finish her matric one day so she can become a nurse. She doesn't want to go back to her school though because she feels too old. She would prefer to go to night school, but is nervous about travelling to the centre in the dark. So, she is thinking of working out a lift club with a few friends who also want to finish their schooling.

Ten years from now, Anthea sees herself in a nurse's outfit, visiting an ouma that she's caring for. She imagines herself sitting on the balcony of the ouma's house, singing and reading to her, and the thought gives Anthea hope for the future. %

DISRUPTIONS AT HOME

Young people's homes and families can be vital sources of care and belonging, providing them with the support, nourishment and mentorship they need to stay in school. But home can also be a place where learners experience anxiety, pressure, grief and violence. Major changes in the home – whether in the form of death, birth, illness or loss of income – can radically destabilise learners and their education. Boys and girls often assume different roles at home, shouldering different expectations and burdens,[36] which can affect their engagement in school.

FOOD INSECURITY

Over the course of lockdown, South Africa has seen stubbornly high rates of food insecurity. As early as June 2020, child and household hunger had drastically increased. By March 2021, there had been little improvement, with nearly 40% of households reporting that they had run out of money to buy food in the previous month.[37] In March 2021, NIDS-CRAM researchers estimated that three million South African children had gone hungry in the seven days prior to being surveyed.[38] They also estimated that 400 000 children were living in households that reported 'perpetual hunger' (daily hunger or hunger almost every day).[39] School meals provide a lifeline to learners who go hungry at home, but only about half of school-age children report accessing school meals.[40]

Learners from food insecure households are more likely to drop out of school.[41] School meals can also boost school attendance. There are important gender dynamics that shape learners' food security:

- International research[42] tells us that as they enter adolescence, girls are biologically more vulnerable to malnutrition than boys.
- In many households across the world, girls and women are last to be served at mealtimes.[43]
- In child-headed homes, it is often the responsibility of the girl child to make sure the family eats. She might miss school to collect food or provisions for relatives.
- When households are food insecure, the pressure on boys to earn an income grows.

"I dropped out because of my situation, not because I wanted to drop out. At the time, I didn't have a place to stay or food. I was going to school with an empty stomach. I applied for a social grant, but it was hard for me to fetch it because I had to borrow money to get it from my aunt. Then, I failed Grade 7 twice."

ANELE* (21)
Gompo, East London,
dropped out of school in Grade 8

*Name has been changed

PREGNANCY

Pregnancies are both a cause and consequence of school dropout for young women[44] – not only can pregnancy prompt learners to leave school, but those who do drop out of school are also at higher risk of falling pregnant. Pregnancy can disrupt learners' schooling in several ways: first, pregnancy forces young women to take leave from school before and after their baby is born, as well as for regular clinic visits, disrupting their learning, and making it more difficult to catch up. Second, beyond the physical challenges of pregnancy, many pregnant learners experience stigma, blame and bullying in their homes, schools, neighbourhoods and health facilities. The shame and admonishment pregnant learners face – both on the way to school and on school grounds – can keep them from the classroom. Pregnant learners who are enrolled in school might be pushed out because of bullying and judgement, and those who fall pregnant after dropping out might be discouraged from returning for fear of what their teachers and classmates might say. Finally, having a child places added caregiving responsibility and financial burdens on young women. Without the right type of support, caring for their child is often at the expense of their schooling.

ANTHEA tells the story of a friend who dropped out of school, and later fell pregnant. With the pressures of a baby on the way, and knowing the comments she would get from classmates and teachers, her friend does not want to return to school.

Young men who are expecting a child rarely have their schooling interrupted, nor do they face the same stigma, shame or blame carried by pregnant learners. As parenting learners, young men are also less likely to be kept from school by their parenting responsibilities.

Rates of teenage pregnancy in South Africa have been steadily declining, dropping by 27% over the past 50 years.[45] Despite adolescent fertility rates falling below the regional (Sub-Saharan African) average, adolescent girls are still far more likely to fall pregnant in South Africa than in most low- and middle-income countries.[46]

In periods of socio-economic upheaval and uncertainty, girls' vulnerability to unintended pregnancies deepens. During Covid-19 school closures, girls and young women lost the protection of the school environment, putting them at greater risk of sexual exploitation and pregnancy, producing a spike in unintended pregnancies among adolescent girls.

"After pregnancies, girls don't want to return to school because they fear being looked at with a new kind of attention. They feel like they are a disgrace to the community and that's why they drop out of school."

FLORGENE KIKA
Khula Development Group intern

"The girls will be judged and ridiculed for falling pregnant at a young age, but the boy who impregnated her will be seen as more of a man."

NONTOBEKO MLAMBO
Mentor with the National Association of Child Care Workers

PREGNANCY IN A PANDEMIC

In April 2021, the MEC for Health, Nomathemba Mokgethi, announced that between April 2020 and March 2021, there had been 23 000 teenage pregnancies in Gauteng.[47] Among the young mothers who gave birth over this period, 934 were between the ages of 10 and 14, raising signals of abuse and statutory rape.

In September 2021, the Department of Basic Education (DBE) presented data on teenage pregnancies to Parliament. According to their data, 30% of teenage girls in South Africa were falling pregnant. This is nearly double pre-pandemic rates.[48] The clear majority (65%) of these pregnancies were said to be unintended. It was further reported that about one in three pregnant girls (aged 10-19) do not return to school.[49]

The DBE report showed that unintended pregnancy can be both a contributor to and an outcome of young women's vulnerability. Gender-based violence, rape and abuse were prevalent among their cohort, and HIV prevalence was shown to be four times higher among young women than among young men.[50] Other researchers suggest that the spike in teenage pregnancy also shows that young women's access to sexual and reproductive health services is poor, and that access to contraceptives (especially during Covid-19) has been challenging.[51]

More recent figures from the Department of Health suggest that 132 612 teenage girls (age 15-19) fell pregnant in 2020, with a further 35 209 between January and March 2021.[52]

HOUSEHOLD RESPONSIBILITIES

Parenting learners carry the responsibility of childcare, which can affect their ability to stay in, and succeed at, school. Whether they are mothers or not, girls and young women carry a greater burden of caregiving and domestic responsibilities at home than boys and young men. This can leave them with little time for schoolwork and keep them from the classroom.[53] In rural areas, girls and young women carry an especially heavy load of household duties, carrying water and fetching firewood.[54] Here, Covid-19 and lockdown have also created additional burdens for girls. When relatives fall sick or there are younger siblings at home and in need of childcare, girls are more likely to take on caregiving responsibilities than boys.[55]

ANTHEA carried a heavy burden of household responsibilities: caring for her grandmother and her cousins, and helping her mother to cook and clean. This left little time for schoolwork, which made her feel increasingly less engaged in schooling.

In many parts of the world, including in South Africa, dominant gender roles position men as 'household providers'. In South Africa, men are also more likely to be employed than women.[56] This means that boy learners often feel greater pressure to earn an income than girls, especially when households are under financial strain.[57]

In single-parent households, boys are more likely than girls to drop out of school, partly because they may feel pressure to contribute to household income.[58] Qualitative evidence suggests that the absence of fathers places boys at greater risk of dropout. This is partly because they lack positive male role models, and partly because female-headed households experience higher rates of poverty, putting boys under greater pressure to find work.[59]

After the death of his father, JABULANI's household struggled to recover, both emotionally and financially. When Jabulani was in Grade 9, he thought it might be better to quit school and look for work to support his mother and younger siblings.

"Because of social constructs and gender stereotypes that play out in the home, there are key differences between how boys and girls spend their time. Boys tend to spend more time on leisure. They tend to have more time to visit friends or participate in sporting activities. On the other hand, girls tend to spend more time on caregiving activities. They tend to take up motherly roles of being responsible for younger siblings, cooking and cleaning. This curtails a girl's sense of freedom and wonder and compels them to 'grow up' or mature much earlier than they should."

NOMFUNDISO RAFUZA
Education Programme Officer with Masibumbane Development Organisation

"When there is parental unemployment and financial burden on their household, boys are encouraged to drop out to start earning an income for the family."

GLORIA NOMONDE MBATYAZWA
Volunteer with Community Action Partnership

DID YOU KNOW?

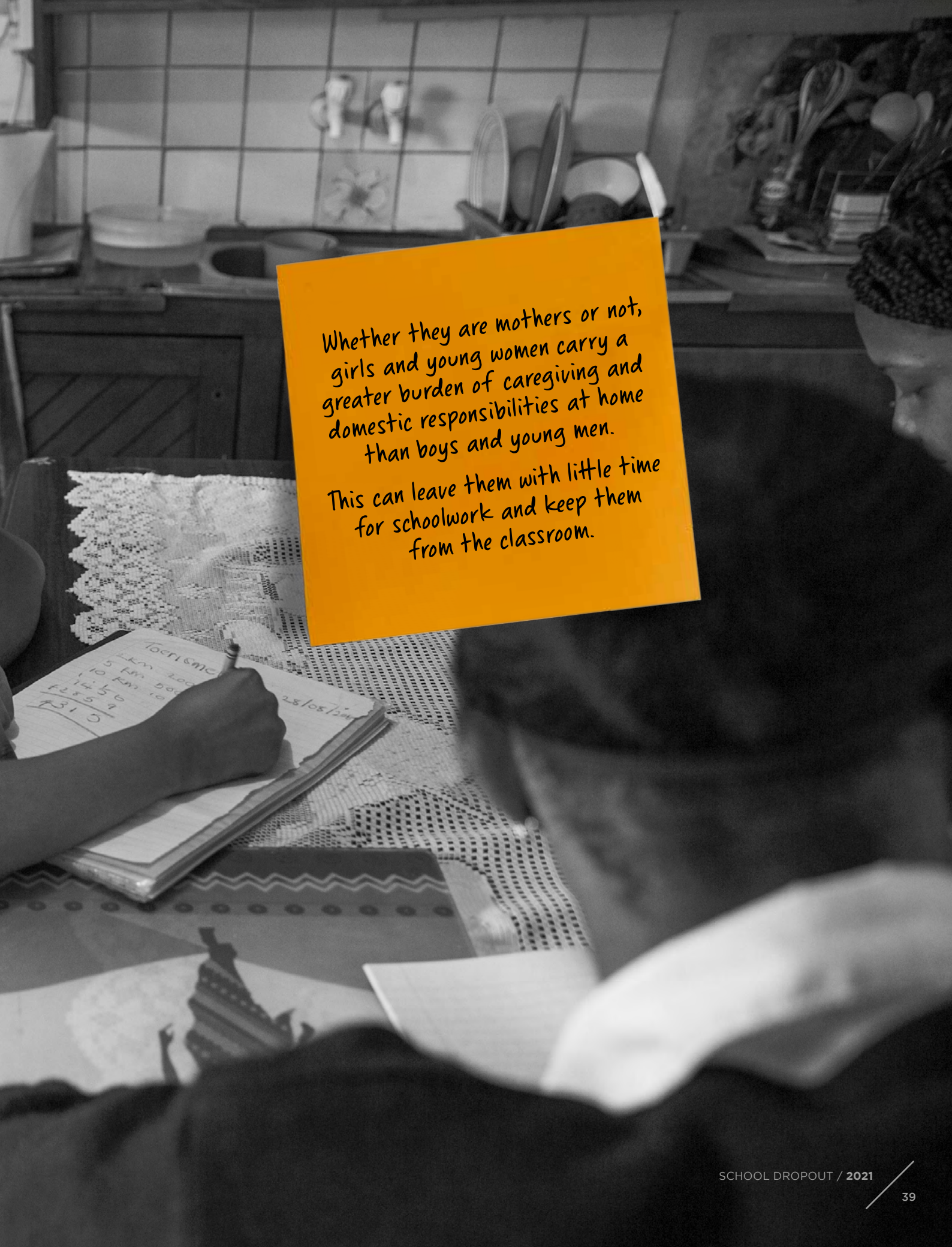
HAVING ROLE MODELS AT HOME CAN BOOST BOYS' AND GIRLS' EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT.

Research suggests that when boys grow up in households headed by a male graduate, they are more likely to graduate. The same was true for girls who grew up in households headed by a female graduate.[60]

When JABULANI started school, his father was an important role model, encouraging him to read and engage with his schoolwork, and motivating him to be curious about the world.

"Boys really need positive role models - someone who can encourage and support them. I have a few boys who are attached to me and I'm attached to them. I'm always telling them to go to school. So, I become that positive role model."

DIVENE PIETERSEN
Community worker with Khula Development Group



Whether they are mothers or not, girls and young women carry a greater burden of caregiving and domestic responsibilities at home than boys and young men.

This can leave them with little time for schoolwork and keep them from the classroom.

DISRUPTIONS AT SCHOOL

School is a vital space for learning, but it can also play other important roles in young people's lives, offering them safety, socialisation, freedom and community – all of which deepen their attachment to school and make it less likely they will drop out. However, many learners continue to feel unsafe, uncomfortable and unstimulated at school. Bullying, absent teachers, irrelevant curricula and poor sanitation are just some of the factors that make learning difficult and can drive learners from school. In classrooms and on playgrounds, learners face different challenges because of their gender.

ACADEMIC STRUGGLES

When looking at average academic performance, boys are outperformed by girls in all grades and in all subjects in South African schools.[61] These differences start early: even at primary school level, gaps in girls' and boys' academic achievement are large and statistically significant, with Grade 4 girls an entire year ahead of Grade 4 boys in reading outcomes.[62] Among the 50 countries that participated in the 2016 PIRLS reading assessments, Grade 4 girls consistently outperformed boys. Among those countries where girls had higher literacy levels than boys, South Africa had the second largest gender gap.[63]

Struggling academically can leave learners feeling inadequate and socially alienated, making it difficult to feel a sense of belonging and connection to school.[64] As they fall further behind, some boys might feel unable to catch up, or that they don't have the academic capacity to complete their schooling.[65]

South African research suggests that boys and men experience higher rates of learning, emotional and behavioural difficulties than women and girls.[66] Through their work, the Masibumbane Development Organisation (MDO) has seen that without the proper support, learning difficulties result in poor academic performance, grade repetition and dropout.

"In my experience, some of the reasons why I see boys dropping out is when they fall behind academically, and they don't feel supported or understood at home or in school."

LINDI STRYDOM
Programme Manager with Community Action Partnership

Notes: MDO reports that because there is a backlog in completing psychological assessments of many learners by the school district, these learners are compelled to remain in an environment where their learning style is not supported.

REPETITION

Given their ongoing academic struggles, boys are more likely to repeat grades than girls. They are also more likely to report 'repetition' and 'being too old' for their grade as reasons for dropping out of school.[67] Repeating grades can leave boys feeling frustrated, humiliated, unmotivated and ultimately disengaged from school.[68]

When JABULANI was in Grades 3 and 4, his family struggled with the loss of his dad. Jabulani started falling behind in school, and once he did, it became very difficult to catch up. He repeated Grades 3 and 4. Each time he repeated grades, he felt embarrassed and incapable. This made it even harder for him to stay motivated.

"What is repeatedly missed in the conversation about gender and school dropout is that boys are more likely than girls to drop out."

MADIPOU MOLEFE
Child and Youth Care Worker with the National Association of Child Care Workers

LACK OF MALE TEACHERS

In South Africa, nearly 70% of all teachers in the schooling system are women.[69] In the foundation phase of schooling, four in five teachers are women.[70] Teaching, along with caring and nurturing young children, is frequently viewed as 'women's work'. These gender stereotypes might discourage men from entering the teaching profession, and those who do teach may feel their masculinity is called into question.[71] But schools and learners benefit when teachers reflect the needs, interests and backgrounds of their learners. In addition to offering male figures for boys to look up to, male teachers can also present learners with non-violent and inclusive models of masculinity that help promote gender equity.

"When I have one-on-one counselling sessions with a girl child, I can better relate to their experience as a woman. Whereas with boys, at times, I bring in a male figure to provide a more relatable experience for them, and found that in most cases it's appreciated and valued."

NONTOBEKO MLAMBO
Mentor with the National Association of Child Care Workers

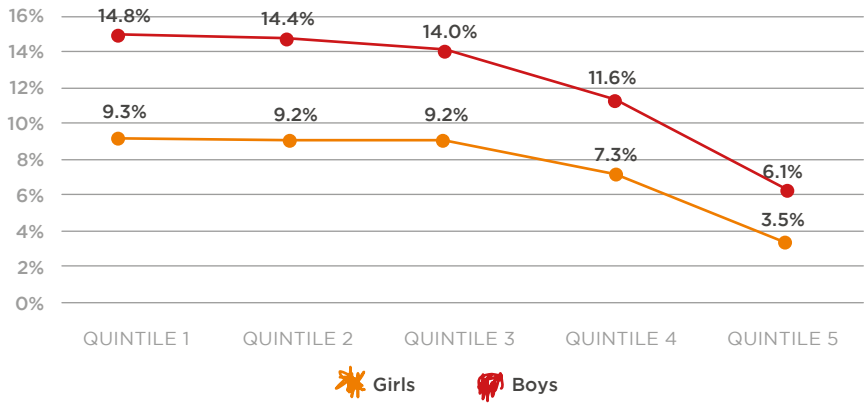
Explained...

*When a phenomenon is **gendered**, it means that it reflects or involves gender differences or stereotypical gender roles.*

RESEARCH ON SOCIO-ECONOMIC POLICY (RESEP): GENDERED DIFFERENCES IN RATES OF REPETITION[72]

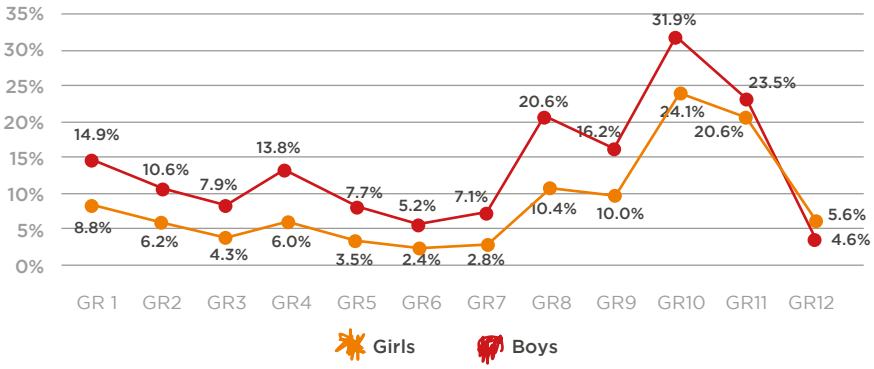
Repetition rates in South African schools are high. The average rates for each school quintile are shown for boys and girls separately in Figure 3. Quintile 1 is the poorest quintile, while quintile 5 is the wealthiest. In the bottom four quintiles, boys have a repetition rate that is at least 50% larger than that of girls. The difference between repetition rates for boys and girls is the most pronounced in the least-resourced schools. The difference in repetition between boys and girls is also evident in Figure 4, which shows repetition rates by grade and gender. The pattern across grades is very clear, with the higher repetition rates in secondary school, and spikes in Grades 1, 4, 8 and 10.

Fig.3 REPETITION BY QUINTILE AND GENDER IN SOUTH AFRICA, 2018/19



LURITS 2018-19 data show that boys repeat at higher rates than girls across all quintiles. But the gender gaps narrow for schools with more resources.

Fig.4 REPETITION BY GRADE AND GENDER IN SOUTH AFRICA, 2018/19



LURITS 2018-19 data show that repetition peaks in high school.

SCHOOL-BASED RESPONSES TO PREGNANCY

Given the mutually-reinforcing relationship between pregnancy and dropout, policy and programming that supports young women's return to school after giving birth is vital. Research[73] shows that young mothers are more likely to return to school if they do so early. The longer a young mother waits to return to school, the more likely she is to drop out. We need policies and programmes that support parenting learners and their children. But attitudes among school staff, as well as other learners, often keep young mothers from returning to school.[74] Many young mothers experience prejudice and stigma from both learners and teachers.

Newly approved national policy[75] (that has been in draft since 2018) encourages pregnant girls to remain in school, and young mothers to return to school soon after birth. However, implementation of these recommendations varies across schools and provinces. In some places, national policy is completely ignored and pregnant learners are expelled. In many instances, schools follow an outdated government policy[76] that prevents young mothers from returning to school within a year of their child's birth. Few schools have nursing, baby-changing or childcare facilities; and teachers, learners and parents can be hostile to pregnant learners and young mothers. To add to this, some school-imposed measures that appear to be in the learners' interest, have created added barriers for pregnant learners, making it more difficult for them to stay in school. This includes the insistence, by some schools, that learners more than six-months pregnant submit a doctor's note to verify they are 'fit to learn' or that pregnant learners are accompanied to school by a guardian.[77]

"We see punitive measures when a girl falls pregnant; a parent is sometimes instructed to go to school to look after the child in case she goes into labour. Meanwhile, the boy's parents are not called to monitor or prevent their son from impregnating someone. Often, school-based programmes focus more on trying to teach the girl child more than boys. I rarely see similarities in a school setting for all genders unless it's academic in nature."

NONTOBEKO MLAMBO
Mentor with the National Association of Child Care Workers

"Girls are likely to perform better in school than boys. But pregnancy leads to dropout and girls being banned from school."

MADIPOU MOLEFE
Child and Youth Care Worker with the National Association of Child Care Workers

Notes:

There is a mutually-reinforcing relationship between pregnancy and dropout.

MENSTRUATION STIGMA, INADEQUATE MENSTRUAL PRODUCTS AND POOR SANITATION FACILITIES

Menstruation can disrupt learners' schooling in several ways: some are teased and shamed, while many also feel physically uncomfortable during their periods. These challenges are only compounded when learners don't have private toilets or menstrual products. In 2018, one in seven menstruating learners in Gauteng[78] reported that they had run short of sanitary products in the previous three months prior to being surveyed. These learners were also more likely to miss school during menstruation. In the Eastern Cape, one in five menstruating learners reported missing an average of 18 school days each year because of menstrual difficulties.[79]

"Girls often don't attend school during their monthly menstrual cycle. In most cases this is due to the lack of access to sanitary products."

BIANCA OPPELT
Communications Manager,
Khula Development Group

RETHINK

Where some researchers have observed quintile-related differences in the relationship between menstruation and missed schooling, their findings have at times been unexpected. While we might expect learners from poorer schools to experience greater barriers to school attendance during menstruation because of poor access to menstrual products, researchers in the Eastern Cape have observed a different trend.[80] Here, it appeared that learners in better-resourced schools missed more school during menstruation than those in poorer schools.[81] While those in wealthier schools were more likely to report the physical symptoms of menstruation as barriers to learning, those in poorer schools reported a greater fear of social sanction during menstruation and wanted to avoid being 'discovered.'[82] As a result of this, menstruating learners from poorer schools might be more inclined to 'stick it out' in the classroom, despite their discomfort.

DISCIPLINARY CLIMATE

South African research suggests that teachers, parents and principals are more likely to report misbehaviour among boys at school than among girls.[83] Boys' disobedience sometimes includes skipping classes and 'bunking' schooldays, usually in groups. Missing class can result in boys falling further behind in their schoolwork and becoming increasingly disengaged from teaching and learning. The problem is made worse by the fact that disciplinary action against boys often keeps them from the classroom.[84] In order to punish learners, teachers send them out or refuse to have them in their classrooms. Boys report that being barred from attending class not only means they miss academic work, it also makes them more likely to engage in substance abuse, gangs or delinquent behaviour.[85]

When JABULANI returned to class late after a spontaneous meeting with his mentor, his teacher sent him to the principal's office. As a result, he missed out on even more teaching. Incidents like this made Jabulani feel alienated by his teachers, making it more difficult for him to connect with them.

"Another problem for boys is bullies. Some children don't talk when they're being bullied. They rather just hide it or stay at home, in a safer place."

ZAIN JACKSON
Intern with Khula Development Group

"Boys can get heavier punishment than girls."

GLORIA NOMONDE MBATYAZWA
Volunteer with Community Action Partnership

SCHOOL-RELATED GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE (SRGBV)

CORPORAL PUNISHMENT

South African research[86] finds that boys are also more likely than girls to experience corporal punishment, both at school and at home.[87] More than 60% of boys reported experiencing corporal punishment at school, while more than half experienced physical punishment at home. Learners who experienced corporal punishment were more likely to be aggressive, perpetuating violence in schools.

BULLYING

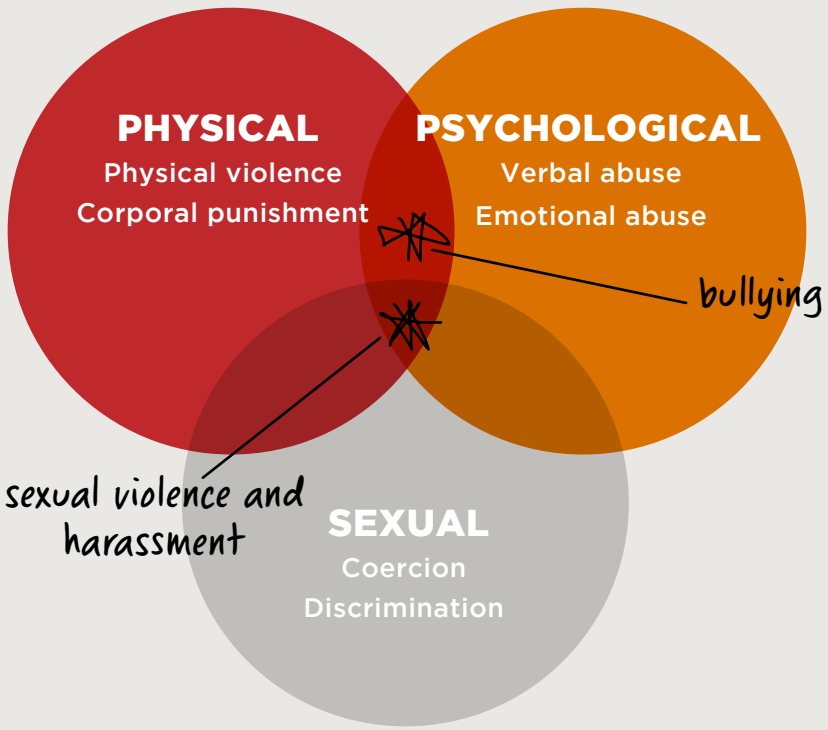
Learners of all genders experience (and perpetrate) bullying. Bullying at school can leave many learners feeling unsafe and unsupported, deepening their disengagement from school. Children who are frequently bullied are nearly three times more likely to feel like an outsider at school, and twice as likely to miss school than those who are not frequently bullied.[88] They also have worse educational outcomes.[89]

"We found that one of the reasons violence persists is that school responses often fail to understand its sexual and gendered aspects. Teachers and learners generally understood violence as something that individuals do, related to some psychological problem. This understanding made gender and sexuality invisible. It failed to notice the experiences of girls and the power relations between girls and boys."[90]

PROF. EMMANUEL MAYEZA
University of the Western Cape

PROF. DEEVIA BHANA
University of KwaZulu-Natal

Fig.5 **SCHOOL-RELATED GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE**



Adapted from: UNESCO & UN Women. 2016. Global guidance on addressing School-related Gender-based Violence.[91]

Explained...

School-related Gender-based Violence *describes acts or threats of sexual, physical or psychological violence occurring in and around schools, perpetrated as a result of gender norms and stereotypes, and enforced by unequal power dynamics.*[92]

While bullying is experienced by all learners, studies have consistently shown that boys are more at risk of bullying, and being bullied, than girls.[93] Research suggests that as early as primary school, boys are socialised into violent forms of masculinity, which are often patriarchal and homophobic.[94] While boys appear to be particularly vulnerable to physical bullying, being bullied can also include being robbed of material possessions or being verbally ridiculed by fellow (often older) learners. The outcome of all these types of bullying is the same: learners feel a lesser sense of attachment and belonging to their school.[95]

JABULANI was bullied by his classmates for being 'too old' for school, and not being able to afford a uniform that fit him properly when he grew out of his old one. Because of this, he often dreaded being around his peers. He also retaliated by getting into fights.

Although boys often emerge as perpetrators of violence against both boys and girls, bullying in schools is complex, and girls are not always passive victims. Girls can also express power through violence against other girls or against some (often younger) boys.[96] Rather than being a personal 'trait' of a child, bullying is a social phenomenon, related to gender, class and power dynamics within schools, and often fuelled by wider practices of violence (including those perpetrated by teachers).[97]

Queer, non-binary and transgender learners are particularly vulnerable to harassment, discrimination and hate crime, which not only threatens their survival and thriving, but also makes it more difficult for them to stay in, and succeed at, school.[98]

SEXUAL VIOLENCE

In addition to the violence of bullying (hitting, name-calling, exclusion, etc.), both girls and boys may experience sexual violence in schools, whether from school staff or fellow learners. However, sexual assault, harassment and coercion are far more widely reported among girls. Sexual violence against girls in schools is therefore rooted in wider gender inequality and violence against women and girls. When asked about the spaces where they feel most unsafe at school, many girls report that the toilets are where they feel most vulnerable to male violence.[99] This is often because there is no adult supervision in these spaces. The threat of sexual assault, harassment and rape may result in girls avoiding school and missing classes. It also puts girls at risk of depression, low self-esteem, unintended pregnancy and HIV[100] – all of which increase the likelihood that they'll become disengaged from school.

The Masibumbane Development Organisation reports that because some girls may have suffered sexual abuse, their trust, particularly in male mentors, may take time to establish. Trauma from sexual violence may discourage girl learners from seeking help and support from male teachers and mentors.

NARE'S STORY

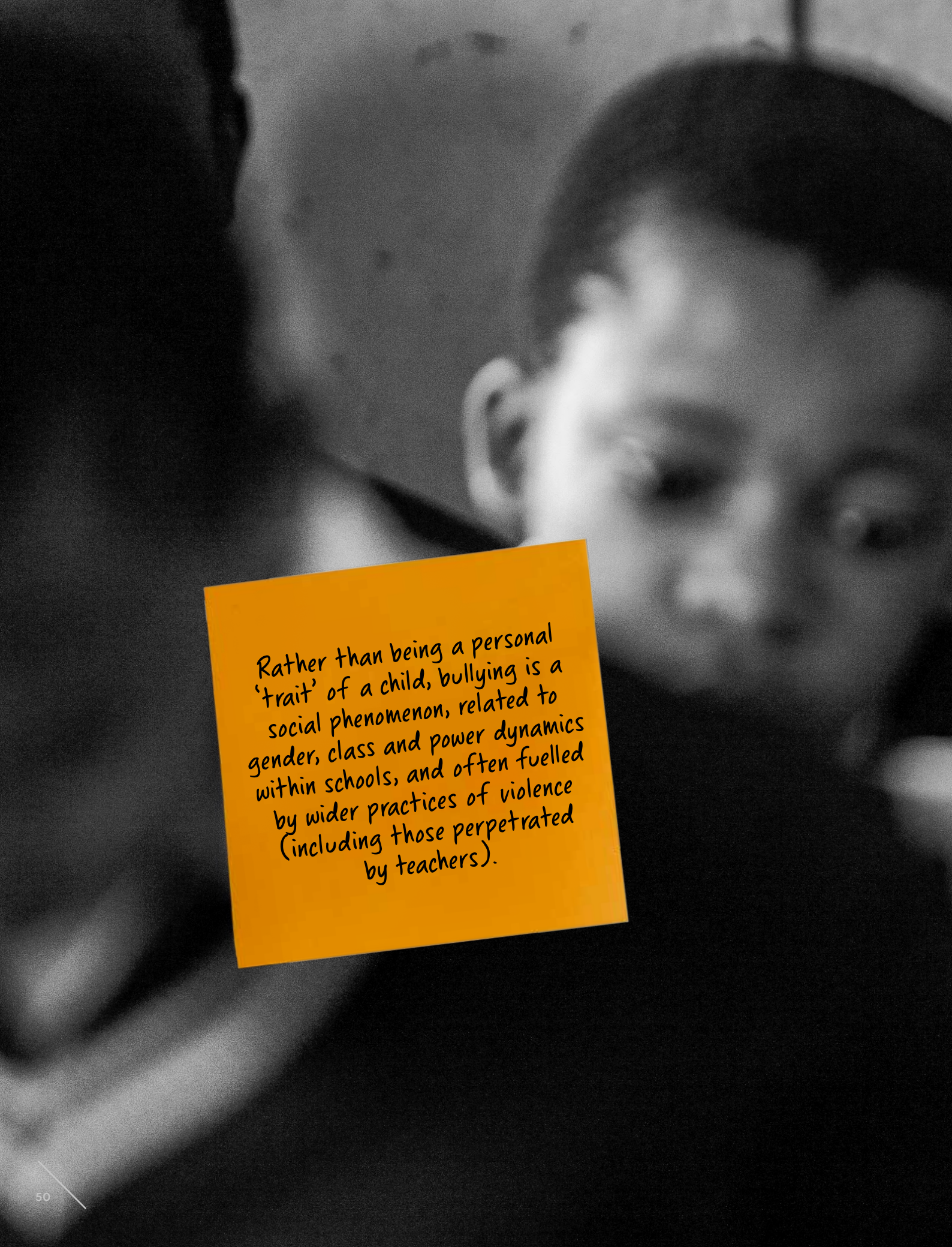
Nare Mphela, a female transgender learner, attended a secondary school in Limpopo. Nare expressed herself as a girl, wore the girls' school uniform and used the girls' school bathroom. During her time at school, she was often humiliated and mistreated. For example, the school principal blocked her from entering classrooms, refused to acknowledge her as a girl, encouraged her friends to not refer to her as their sister, and urged learners to harass her in the girls' bathroom by grabbing her genitals to "find out what is there".

The discrimination, marginalisation and violence that Nare experienced at the hands of her educators and peers is what ultimately led to her failing her matric exams and dropping out of school before completing her education. Nare's experience shows the reality of many LGBTQI+ learners in South African schools – despite the constitutional promise of the right to education for all, the prohibition of discrimination based on gender, and the right to be treated with respect and concern. Although Nare won the case of discrimination against her principal in the Equality Court, it does not take away from the harm that she suffered as a result of prejudice against transgender persons. This intolerance created a school environment that not only sought to exclude her, but also showed a disregard for who she is.

Neither the Department of Basic Education nor the Stats SA General Household Survey specifically collect data on LGBTQI+ learner dropout. As such, we rely on individual stories to determine the impact of discrimination and marginalisation on LGBTQI+ learner dropout. Despite not reflecting the full picture, the experiences of Nare and others tell us that a failure to address discrimination against LGBTQI+ individuals, sensitising educators and learners alike, does contribute to learner dropout.

Nare was tragically killed in January 2020, at age 28. We salute her courage, activism, and long-lasting contribution to the lives of LGBTQI+ youth across South Africa.

** With thanks to Amy-Leigh Payne and Charlene Kreuser, Legal Resources Centre. The Legal Resources Centre is a non-government, public interest organisation, using law as an instrument for justice, human rights and socio-economic transformation in South Africa. Photograph courtesy of Gugu Mandla, Media and Documentation Officer at Iranti.*



Rather than being a personal 'trait' of a child, bullying is a social phenomenon, related to gender, class and power dynamics within schools, and often fuelled by wider practices of violence (including those perpetrated by teachers).

DISRUPTIONS IN THE NEIGHBOURHOOD

Schools and homes are nested in communities. Friends, neighbours and community-based organisations can create an enabling environment for young people to flourish, offering mentors and role models, as well as networks and opportunities to explore their interests, passions and talents. But neighbourhoods can also be sources of violence, peer pressure and unhealthy distraction. Gender often shapes the expectations, stigmas, connections and abuses that young people experience in their neighbourhoods.

THREAT OF ASSAULT

Many learners in South Africa encounter violence on the way to school. Young women are especially vulnerable to sexual harassment and assault, both on their journey to school, and in their neighbourhoods. Because of this, they tend to face greater restrictions on their mobility, as families try to protect them from harm.[101] When the journey to and from school is considered unsafe, girls are more likely to be kept from, or avoid, making the journey.

ANTHEA often had to stay home and miss school because of gang violence or the threat of assault when using public transport. While her brother could go out and visit friends, Anthea often felt trapped.

"Boys are allowed to go outside more often than girls. This contributes to girls longing for the outside world. Girls are often judged by their community for their appearance and behaviour. Sometimes stricter 'rules' or etiquette are enforced for them more than for boys."

NADINE MANUELS
Mentor with Community Action Partnership's literacy intervention programme

POOR ACCESS TO SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH SERVICES

A recent South African study[102] found that adolescent girls and young women have a high unmet need for contraception, with 31% of girls (between the ages of 15 and 19) not getting the contraceptives they needed. Very few had information or knowledge about contraceptives. Those who did seek contraception were often judged and mistreated by clinic health staff. Contraceptive stock-outs, inconvenient clinic hours, and the Covid-19 pandemic have only made access to contraceptives more challenging. Without convenient, youth-friendly access to contraceptives, the likelihood of unintended pregnancy increases, putting young women at greater risk of dropout.

GANGS

While learners of all genders can be involved in gangs, gang membership is more common for boys and men. For boys who experience alienation and instability at home and at school, spending more time out in the neighbourhood is common and appealing; gangs can become an attractive form of social belonging and a route to material resources.[103] Among those young men who lack positive male role models, feel disengaged from school, and seek alternative sources of income, gangs can fulfil a range of social, emotional and material needs, and become the final catalyst for dropout.[104]

"Boys are less interested in schoolwork which they either don't understand or don't relate to. This can accelerate their experience of not finding a true place to belong. They choose the path in which they feel the least judged, the most understood and the most supported, and for many they receive all of that from a gang as opposed to their families or school."

LINDI STRYDOM
Programme Manager with
Community Action Partnership

SUBSTANCE ABUSE

Gang membership and substance abuse are often interrelated, with one fuelling the other.[105]

Research suggests that substance use is higher among boys than girls and worsens as boys get older.[106] Boys who use substances not only find it difficult to be attentive and engaged at school; they are also more likely to have disciplinary action taken against them, keeping them from the classroom.[107] Studies suggest a mutually-reinforcing relationship between school disengagement and substance use, in which disengagement leads to substance use, which in turn deepens disengagement.[108]

JABULANI's brother, Siya, started using drugs with his friends after school. Soon, he started missing school to spend more time with his friends. Whenever he was home, he and his mother fought. Eventually, Siya dropped out and his mom kicked him out of the house.

"Substance abuse is identified as a leading cause of disengagement. Learners (more especially boys) as young as 10 years in the under-resourced communities we work in, use more than one drug, affecting their behaviour and cognitive abilities in school. This is often compounded by a lack of caregiver involvement. As a result, there is an observed decline in academic performance, as well as an increase in absenteeism which are red flags for eventual dropout."

NOMFUNDISO RAFUZA
Education Programme Officer with
Masibumbane Development Organisation

Notes:

"There are stark differences between the challenges that boys and girls face in their neighbourhoods, which may be influenced by factors within the communities themselves. For boys, our mentors were able to see patterns where their behaviour was influenced by peers and older people within their communities. Often this led to them being involved in criminal activities, and in extreme cases, even becoming gangsters. This tends to lead to eventual dropout. Where girls are concerned, experiences of sexual grooming by older men, sexual exploitation and sexual abuse have been shared all too often. These result in low sense of self and even dependence on older men where they end up letting go of their academic aspirations and end up cohabiting and becoming teenage parents."

NOMFUNDISO RAFUZA
Education Programme Officer with Masibumbane Development Organisation

SECTION/3

THINK AGAIN

Rethinking assumptions about gender and education: What the research tells us...

I am
15
SILVER OAKS
SECONDARY SEKONDER

Section 2 explored how the disruptions that learners face in their homes, schools and neighbourhoods are shaped by their gender and other social inequalities. Gender matters for the ways that learners experience violence, familial expectation, the learning environment and their relationships with peers.

The previous section also demonstrated how narratives of gender and schooling in South Africa are dominated by powerful assumptions. These assumptions have meant that the experiences of boy and girl learners are often oversimplified or misunderstood, creating unhelpful stereotypes that can make their journeys through school more difficult.

This section offers a more nuanced picture of the role of gender in South African schooling. The findings presented here may not fit neatly into societal assumptions about the experiences of boys and girls in school or the stereotypical factors influencing their disengagement. By exploring how common assumptions about gendered experiences differ from what the research says, policymakers and role-players in the basic education sector may be in a better position to build gender-responsive dropout prevention efforts.

ASSUMPTION:

"GIRLS' VULNERABILITY MEANS THAT BOYS ARE AT LESS RISK OF DROPOUT."

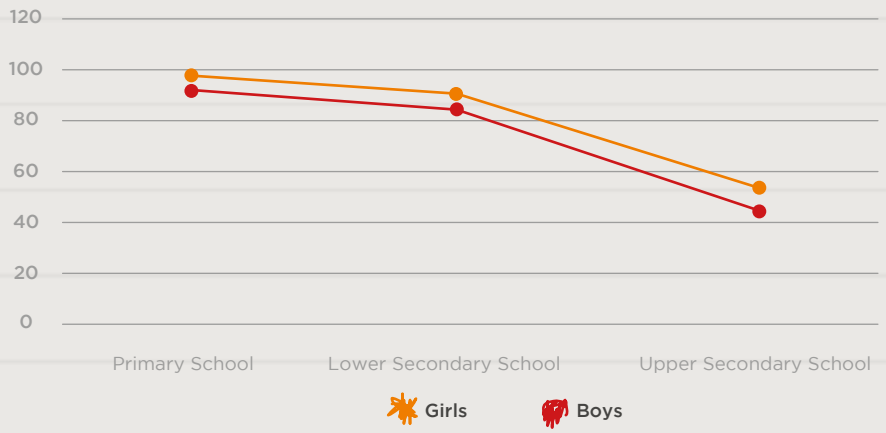
RETHINK

While dropout rates are high among learners of all genders, boys in South Africa are more likely to drop out, especially as they enter secondary school.[109]

The vulnerabilities of young women in South Africa are widely reported. Women and girls are at greater risk of gender-based violence, HIV and joblessness. Add the country's high rates of teenage pregnancy and many assume that girls will be more likely than boys to leave school before finishing matric. The reality is that boys are dropping out of school more often than girls. Over the last 10 years, young men have constituted a declining proportion of those writing matric. In 2018, for every 100 young women writing matric, there were only 80 young men.[110]

This doesn't mean that girls are not at risk of dropping out; it does mean that policy and programming may overlook the vulnerability of boy learners.

Fig.6 **SCHOOL COMPLETION RATES BY GENDER IN SOUTH AFRICA, 2019**



UNICEF data show that in South Africa girls are more likely to complete school than boys. This gender gap emerges in primary school, widens in high school, and then remains steady as learners approach matric.[111]

ASSUMPTION:

"YOUNG MOTHERS DON'T WANT TO RETURN TO SCHOOL."

Despite broadly-inclusive national policy, schools often create barriers to a young mother's re-entry into school.

Some researchers suggest that girls are, in general, more likely to return to school after dropping out than boys, retaining a greater sense of attachment to school even when their education is disrupted.[112] Nevertheless, dropout among pregnant adolescents is high. South African public discourse is gripped by a deep concern over teenage pregnancy, partly because it is often premarital, and partly because of its potential effect on young women's education and the future wellbeing of both mother and child.[113] As the previous section showed, research[114] has suggested a mutually-reinforcing relationship between pregnancy and school dropout: young women who leave school are at greater risk of falling pregnant, and young women who fall pregnant are at greater risk of leaving school. What is usually missing from the story is the role that schools, households, neighbourhoods and policymakers play in determining whether a young mother returns to school. Too many pregnant or mothering learners are bullied by teachers and peers, and discouraged or banned from attending school. After giving birth, many parenting learners want to return to school, but are not supported to do so.

In November 2021, the Department of Basic Education committed to providing psychosocial and educational support for pregnant learners through the deployment of Learner Support Agents (LSAs). Through this intervention, the department aims to help learners stay engaged with schooling during pregnancy, and help mothering learners to return to school after giving birth.[115] However, for this commitment to be meaningfully felt by pregnant and parenting learners, it must also be championed by schools and families.

ASSUMPTION:

"BOYS DROP OUT OF SCHOOL BECAUSE THEY ARE DELINQUENT."

RETHINK

Treating boys as troublemakers can keep them from classrooms.

The gendered concern about pregnancy in schoolgirls is mirrored by a similarly gendered concern about antisocial behaviour among schoolboys.[116] Boys are often thought of as disruptive, badly behaved and uncommitted to their schoolwork. Some qualitative studies[117] suggest that because of these gendered stereotypes, boys are more likely to be patrolled and punished by school staff. Since punishments include keeping young boys from the classroom, gendered disciplinary procedures may contribute to boys falling behind in their schoolwork.

"The under-performance of boys, relative to girls, is particularly serious in South Africa. This phenomenon can be seen across all grades in the schooling system, and males drop out to a significantly greater degree than females before Grade 12. This contributes to a range of social ills. It is clear that improvement strategies must pay careful attention to this problem."

DEPARTMENT OF BASIC EDUCATION
Action Plan 2024: towards the realisation of Schooling 2030[118]

ASSUMPTION:

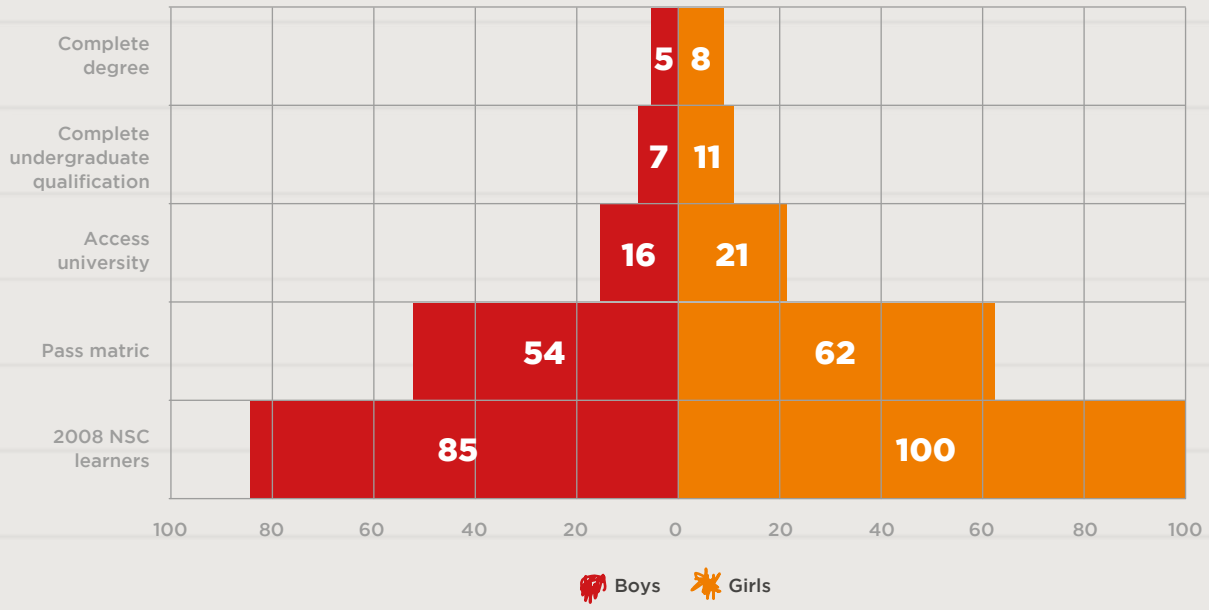
"GIRLS PERFORM POORLY IN MATHS AND SCIENCE."

RETHINK

Based on average results of a full learner cohort, girls outperform boys in all school subjects, including maths and science.[119] While boys are more likely to be the highest-performing learners in these subjects, girls are less likely to fail.

Strongly-held notions that boys are more proficient in maths and science than girls may be influenced by a missing variable in the data: dropout. Higher rates of dropout among boys mean that by the time learners reach matric, the cohort of boys remaining is often academically stronger, outperforming girls in maths and science.[120] However, when one considers the average results of the full cohort, girls outperform boys in both subjects.

Fig. 7 **NATIONAL HIGHER EDUCATION OUTCOMES BY GENDER, 2008 MATRIC COHORT[121]**



ASSUMPTION:

"WOMEN'S HIGHER RATES OF UNEMPLOYMENT ARE RELATED TO THEIR POOR EDUCATIONAL PERFORMANCE."

RETHINK

Even though women's academic lead over men widens throughout their education,[122] their job prospects remain narrower than that of men.[123]

No matter their gender, a matric certificate improves young people's chances of further education, secure jobs and better salaries. However, despite outperforming young men at schools, colleges and universities, women are less likely to find a job. More research is needed to understand why women's advantage in education is not translating into an advantage in the labour market.[124]

It is only in the fields of Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) where women's lower employment rates may be related to their academic performance at schools, since fewer girls appear among the top-performing learners in STEM. Boys or young men only perform better than girls at the top end of STEM exam results. Since learners need to score more than 60% to be eligible for these subjects at university level, the higher performance of boys at the top-end has important implications for university entrance. But the large gender differences in STEM subject choice at university cannot be fully explained by boys making up the majority of high achievers in these subjects at school level.[125]

OPINION /

ADDRESSING DROPOUT AT THE SPEED OF TRUST

Earlier in this section, we described the common assumption that boys drop out of school because of delinquency. But research tells us that treating boys as troublemakers can keep them from the classroom. In the opinion piece that follows, Dr Philip Geldenhuys explores how we might shift relationships between boy learners and the adults in their lives, and in doing so, support boys to stay in school.

DR PHILIP GELDENHUYS
Co-founder and former CEO of Community Keepers

Notes:

After more than a decade of working with schoolboys, I've learnt that mutual trust lies at the heart of whether boys stay in and are enabled to succeed at school. Between 2008 and 2017, I served as CEO of Community Keepers, a non-profit organisation offering therapeutic counselling and psychosocial support in 29 schools across Cape Town. Boys could report to our offices themselves, or be referred by teachers or parents. It became apparent that the young boys walking into our therapy rooms simply did not trust adults because of their past experiences. And who can blame them?

Too often, we heard about actions committed against boys by the adults in their lives, including verbal and physical abuse and harsh discipline. We also heard about the actions withheld by the adults in their lives – support, empathy, attention and interest. In cases of repeated exposure to one or a combination of these acts, whether aggression or neglect, boys were less likely to trust adults to care for or guide them. And boys who did not trust adults, were less likely to engage, learn and progress in school.

In my experience, mutual trust between learners, parents and teachers is fundamental to building the type of support systems that would keep boys engaged in school. Too many boys (and learners in general) experience neglect and abuse at home, often coupled with absent caregivers. Many of these boys are then triggered through exposure to similar treatment at school: harsh discipline, verbal abuse, hostility, bullying and scapegoating. The combination of these factors and experiences create a school culture in which boys tend to anticipate harm (whether physical or emotional) and feel physically unsafe and unwelcome at school.

John*, for example, was 16 years old and in Grade 8 when he was referred to one of our school-based therapy offices after swearing at an older male teacher. During the assessment, it emerged that John's alcoholic grandfather verbally and physically abused him from an early age. He had a tense relationship with his grandfather and had even started physically resisting him. Meanwhile, John's teacher felt that the teenager was disrespectful, as he often arrived late for class and never apologised. This led to the teacher talking down to him in a similar way that his grandfather did. It even reached the point where John began mocking this teacher, stepping forwards as if wanting to hit him. John was sent home several times for bad behaviour. At some stage, he never returned to school.

Without the restoration of trust among our learners, we will struggle to prevent school dropout. In other words, the speed it takes to rebuild trust (and address the country's dropout crisis) is also the speed at which more boys will flourish at school. But how do we build trust in a country where adults have let children down?

- **Teachers can offer learners the opportunity to get to know them by being vulnerable about their personal fears, mistakes and dreams. They can also involve parents and caregivers to act as family liaisons between the school and the community.**

- **Parents/caregivers can show positive interest in education at home by asking learners questions about activities and progress at school. They can also look for volunteer opportunities at their child's school, like supervising when there is teacher absenteeism. Healthy, trusting families will lead to healthy, trusting communities and schools.**

- **Principals can spend more time outside of the office, making themselves visible to learners. This will help them build positive relationships with at-risk boys, rather than only seeing them when they are in trouble. Another practical step is to formally establish an Early Warning System (EWS) tracking absenteeism, academic performance and behavioural issues as signs of disengagement. Through effective tracking, schools can start showing positive interest in learner engagement, getting involved in the lives of at-risk boys and their families before it's too late.**

- **School Governing Bodies are best positioned to promote parent engagement. Parenting committees can further build trust among community stakeholders.**

- **Government can collect and interpret data on school dropout statistics and keep district and school management accountable. This can indirectly build trust by showing government's intention to address dropout. Collaboration with provincial departments of health, housing and social development can help build trust between government departments, as well as between schools and government institutions. Using the school as a base from which these departments can serve the community could publicly show this partnership.** %

**Name has been changed*

SECTION/4

CAUSE AND EFFECT

Disruptions to education are gendered and so are the consequences.

The previous sections have explored how gender-related barriers and setbacks shape the ways in which learners experience school.

Over the course of the Covid-19 pandemic, rates of absenteeism and estimated dropout figures increased dramatically. In 2020, the matric pass rate was already 5% lower than it had been in 2019.[126] The ripple effect of pandemic-related disruptions will likely continue to be felt over the next decade, both in educational outcomes and dropout figures.

Within the first five months of the Covid-19 lockdown, five million children lost access to school meals,[127] and by March 2021, even fewer learners were accessing food at school.[128] When learners are hungry, they find it difficult to learn, and are more likely to fall behind in their classwork. To make matters worse, between March 2020 and June 2021, most primary school learners lost 70-100% (i.e. a full year) of learning relative to the 2019 cohort.[129] The long-term effects of disruptions to schooling for today's primary school children — including learning losses and repetition rates — may lead to dropout when they reach Grades 10, 11 and 12.[130]

In July 2021, researchers, drawing on NIDS-CRAM household survey data, estimated that dropout was the highest it had been in 20 years. NIDS-CRAM reported that since the start of the pandemic, an additional 500 000 learners had not returned to school when compared to pre-pandemic figures.[131] However, subsequent analysis of school administrative data[132] paints a more conservative picture, suggesting that higher than normal rates of non-attendance during the pandemic have largely not translated into permanent dropout. But even if rates of dropout are lower than what NIDS-CRAM suggests, there remain concerns that the ripple effect of disrupted learning is still to be felt. To get a precise picture of dropout in the country requires accurate and complete datasets that track learners' progression over the course of their schooling journey.

The starting point is having a standardised definition of dropout. This call is echoed by a coalition of activists, researchers and education experts in an open letter to the Minister of Basic Education, Angie Motshekga, published in August 2021.[133]

What type of dropout data is available and what does that data tell us? The opinion piece on the next page explores this question — from the perspective of an expert in the field.

OPINION /

THE LONG-TERM IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC ON EDUCATION

The Covid-19 pandemic has been extraordinarily disruptive to schooling in South Africa, as in most parts of the world. A significant amount of teaching time has been lost. Schools were initially closed on the 18th of March 2020, with a phased re-opening where the first grades (7 and 12) returned on the 8th of June 2020 and the last grades (5 and 8) returned on the 31st of August. Over and above a further school closure during the third wave in 2021, even when schools were officially open, most schools have been implementing some sort of rotational timetabling to allow for social distancing among learners.

NOMPUMELELO MOHOHLWANE
Deputy Director: Research Coordination, Monitoring and Evaluation at the Department of Basic Education

As a consequence of disruptions to schooling, learners have been attending school 50% of the time or less, even when schools were closed. This raises crucial questions about the impact of these disruptions on learning, social safety nets provided through schools, including meals (more than 80% of learners rely on daily school meals), and school dropout. Evidence on the initial impact of the pandemic on these outcomes is beginning to emerge. But perhaps the more pertinent questions is: What will be the long-term impact on the children who have been affected in 2020 and 2021? And even more urgently, what should be done next, while the pandemic is not yet fully behind us, to ensure that further long-term damage is minimised?

WHAT HAPPENED TO SCHOOL ATTENDANCE AND LEARNING?

The National Income Dynamics Study – Coronavirus Rapid Mobile Survey (NIDS-CRAM), a nationally representative household survey administered to an adult representative on behalf of their household, measured learner attendance rates at three different points: July 2020, November 2020 and April 2021. In July 2020, the average attendance rate was as low as 39% on average, with large differences by grade. We found that for officially "closed grades" attendance differed by wealth: the wealthiest 10% of households were much more likely to be at school. Since the phased reopening by grade was intended to allow schools to implement Covid-19 management plans, including social distancing, it seems that some schools with more resources, such as classroom space, managed to reopen earlier.

The reopening of all grades resulted in a substantial recovery in attendance rates, with average attendance across all grades at 95% in November 2020, with similarly high rates of attendance observed across children of all socio-economic backgrounds. It should be noted that this figure of 95% refers to having attended school within the last two weeks, so it does not reflect the lost time due to rotational timetabling.

Worryingly, this recovery was followed by a decline in attendance in the April 2021 round of NIDS-CRAM to about 92%. Comparing the NIDS-CRAM statistics to the General Household Survey of 2018 (a pre-pandemic benchmark) where only 3.6% of school-aged children were not attending school, it was estimated that an additional 500 000 learners had not returned to school in 2021, although the authors did acknowledge that this number could have been significantly lower, depending on assumptions made in the analysis.

Encouragingly, an October 2021 report by the Department of Basic Education (DBE) titled *Impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on school enrolments*[134] suggests that the number of learners not returning to school in 2021 was not nearly as high as what the NIDS-CRAM results projected. Using official school enrolment data from Term 1 in 2021 and comparing this to Term 1 in 2020, the report concludes that around 19 000 learners in the compulsory school-going age may have dropped out. The report also pointed to evidence of a reduction in the number of children entering school of roughly 27 000.

WHY WAS THERE SUCH A LARGE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE NIDS-CRAM RESULTS AND THE DBE REPORT?

Although we must acknowledge some uncertainty about this variance, two key differences are worth noting. The first is about the definition of dropout and the second is the data source used to calculate dropout. Starting with the latter, NIDS-CRAM was a telephonically administered household sample survey, whereas the DBE report used school enrolment data as reported by school principals. In the case of NIDS-CRAM, the focus is on attending school whereas the DBE data reflects having enrolled at a school in 2021. In NIDS-CRAM, it is possible that many of those who have not been attending school are enrolled in a school and may end up returning. In the case of the DBE data, it is possible that some children who are enrolled in school have largely disengaged from school because of disruptions to the normal timetable.

In the end, what is safe to conclude from the available evidence is that, while the disruptions in attendance did not convert into dropping out for most learners, school attendance has been seriously affected by the pandemic, and this kind of disengagement presents a risk to ultimately dropping out of school.

In the near future, there may be more learners than usual who drop out of school due to having been largely disengaged throughout 2020 and 2021. However, in the medium to long term, the greater risk of dropping out will be caused by the learning losses that have been incurred because of lost school time.

Before the pandemic, we already knew that one of the strongest predictors of children dropping out of the education system is poor learning foundations, and we have now begun to see significant learning losses among learners in South Africa.

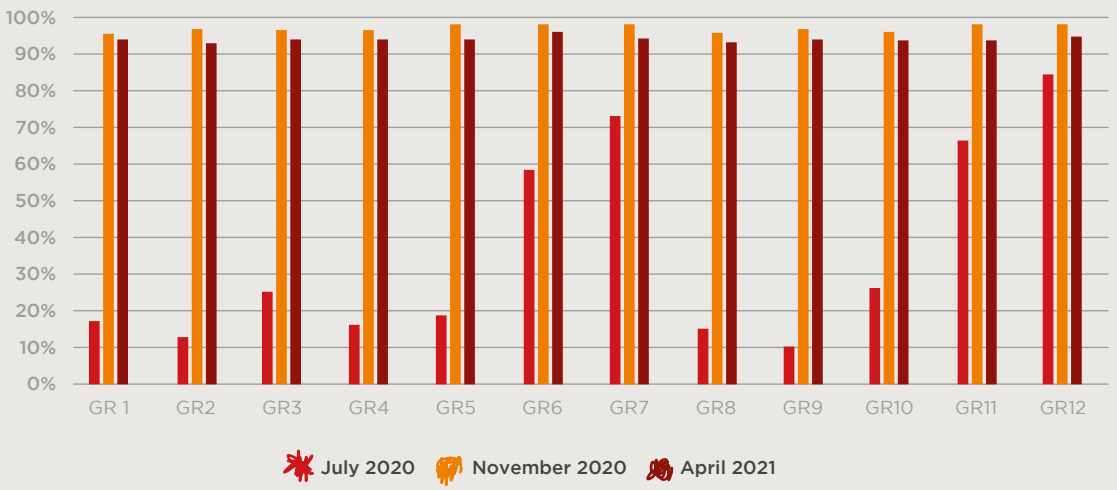
At the foundation phase, the estimated learning losses during 2020 were up to 75% of a year of learning at the Grade 3 level. This was found in typical Quintile 1 to 3 schools, which represent the majority of schools. So, while many of these learners are now attending school more regularly, all disruptions to everyday attendance deserve our primary attention. Any continued disruptions to normal teaching time, even through rotational attendance, means that learning losses have in fact not been halted but continue to compound.

The gaps in learning and mastering basic skills that would have been taught firstly in the foundation phase, but across all phases, should receive urgent attention to prevent later dropout in the years to come. Research[135] investigating the impact of a 3.5-month school closure following an earthquake in Pakistan, shows that children (aged 3-15) who were affected by the earthquake were 1.5 years behind their classmates. Part of the reason is that when schools reopened after the earthquake, teaching resumed as though the learning losses from the disruptions had not occurred.

This shows that learning losses can continue even after the return to school if the learning gaps are not identified and addressed.

In closing, firstly, we need to ensure that uninterrupted daily attendance becomes a reality for all children. Secondly, we need to address the learning gaps incurred until now. While the trimmed curriculum and extensions in learning time are key enablers for this, teachers need directed and extended support, based on the best evidence on how to teach effectively. Finally, intervening now is more impactful and cost-effective in reducing later dropouts, as well as mitigating lower returns to education among adults, as the Pakistan example has shown. %

Fig.8 **OVERALL LEARNER ATTENDANCE BY GRADE IN SA SCHOOLS, JULY 2020-APRIL 2021**



When schools reopened for all grades in November 2020, attendance improved dramatically.[136]

GENDER MATTERS

IN ADDRESSING COVID-19 DISRUPTIONS TO EDUCATION, WE MUST ALSO PAY ATTENTION TO GENDER.

When schools are disrupted by crises, like epidemics or regional conflict, the consequences are felt differently by boys and girls. History shows that vulnerable girls in Sub-Saharan Africa are more likely to drop out of school in times of educational disruption, deepening gender inequality. This is often because of the increased care burden stemming from school closures, as well as increases in gender-based violence and unintended pregnancies affecting girls and young women. On the other hand, boys who drop out because of disengagement (rather than pregnancy or caregiving burden), may be more likely to stay away from school once schools reopen, worsening rates of male dropout.[137]

When South African schools reopened following Covid-19 lockdown, there were households in which some children returned to school, while others did not.[138] It's possible that these decisions had a gendered dimension, either keeping girls from school to care for relatives, or boys from school to earn an income.

Explained...

Gender parity *is a measure that reports the distribution or representation of men relative to women, or girls relative to boys. Gender parity is also referred to as the sex ratio, and usually reports on the basis of a gender binary. Although gender parity might be used as one of the metrics for gender equity, it is not the same as gender equity. While gender parity is a purely descriptive measure, gender equity is about justice.*

IN SOUTH AFRICA, DROPPING OUT OF SCHOOL BEFORE REACHING MATRIC LIMITS YOUNG PEOPLE'S ACCESS TO:

FURTHER EDUCATION

Without a matric, young people are less likely to find a job or enrol in further education and training. Young people who have not completed Grade 12 find it very difficult to further their education, even when they are technically eligible. National survey data show that only 9% of young people (aged 15-29) who leave school after Grade 9 go on to enrol in TVET or ABET colleges.[139] The proposed General Education Certificate (GEC) would give these young people a national qualification, which might help them demonstrate their knowledge and skills to colleges and employers. Since boys leave secondary school at higher rates than girls, a GEC might be especially beneficial for young men who want to learn a technical skill or enter occupational or workplace-based training. In 2020, nearly six out of 10 people (aged 15-60) who were not in employment, education or training (NEET) did not have a matric certificate.[140]

GENDER MATTERS

Women make up the vast majority of people who are stuck outside of education, employment and training;[141] they also remain stuck for longer than men.[142] This is despite the fact that women are, on average, more qualified than men. On the other hand, women who pass matric are more likely to leverage their matric certificate for further education, and are also more likely to complete their university qualifications.[143]

EMPLOYMENT

Compared to those with higher qualifications, young people without a matric certificate are at highest risk of joblessness.[144] More than half of South Africa's unemployed population does not have a matric.[145] Even without further education, a matric certificate increases young people's chances of employment. When used as a ticket to tertiary education, young people's chances of finding a job are more than doubled.[146]

GENDER MATTERS

Despite being generally more qualified than men, women are less likely to be employed and continue to earn less than their male counterparts.[147] So, while all young people benefit from a matric qualification, men have been less able to leverage their matric certificate for further qualifications, while women have been less able to leverage their higher qualifications for employment.[148]

Young people without a matric qualification face the highest barriers to employment and further education.

JOB SECURITY AND HIGHER INCOME

In the early phases of Covid-19 lockdown, young people were the age group most likely to lose their jobs.[149] But, between February 2020 and January 2021, those with a matric were less likely than their peers to experience job losses,[150] or have their salaries reduced.[151]

GENDER MATTERS

Relative to men, women have been far more likely to lose their jobs during Covid-19 lockdown, and far slower to recover.[152] While educational qualifications helped protect both men and women from losing their jobs during lockdown, making them more secure than their unqualified peers, women continued to be at higher risk of job loss than men, despite being more qualified on average.[153]

LONG-TERM WELLBEING

Young people without a matric qualification face the highest barriers to employment and further education. This not only limits their social and economic participation, it also affects their wellbeing. Being unemployed and locked out of further education lowers young people's self-esteem. Many feel angry, isolated and inadequate,[154] making them more vulnerable to substance abuse, gang activities and transactional sex.[155]

GENDER MATTERS

Poor educational outcomes make it difficult for men to fulfil social expectations that position them as household providers. This can deepen their sense of failure and exclusion. Supporting men to complete school and further their education can impact their overall sense of wellbeing and belonging. Similarly, supporting women's education has wider social benefits, including improved child health and poverty reduction.[156]

SOCIAL JUSTICE

Learners from the most vulnerable households are at highest risk of dropping out of school.[157] If we don't find ways to support these learners through school, we effectively trap them in cycles of intergenerational poverty and social exclusion, which often re-inscribe racial and gender inequalities. Over the course of the Covid-19 lockdown, the highest rates of dropout have been among the poorest households in rural areas.[158]

GENDER MATTERS

By advancing gender parity in school completion; understanding the gendered expectations and burdens carried by girls and boys; and offering targeted, gender-responsive support to young people of all gender expressions, we pave the way for a more just future – one in which young people's chances are not tied to their gender identification.

SECTION/5

INTEGRATIN GENDER INTO DROPOUT PREVENTIO

NG

N

This section explores how schools can begin to map gender-responsive dropout prevention plans. The first step is getting to grips with key concepts that can be used to shape thoughtful gender policy and programming.

"Equal treatment of learners of all genders must be modelled by teaching staff and School Management Teams (SMTs). Boys can also sweep floors and sing soprano in the choir. Girls can play soccer and can wear grey pants and a tie. Equal treatment must be integrated in playgrounds during break times, in queues for school nutrition, and during teaching and learning times. However, schools must also have [gender-targeted] resources such as sanitary towels and sickbays that will support girls during pregnancy and during their monthly periods. Teachers and learners need to adopt a zero tolerance for stigmatising attitudes towards girls who are pregnant in school."

NOMFUNDISO RAFUZA
Education Programme Officer with Masibumbane Development Organisation

GENDER PARITY VS GENDER EQUITY

In the context of schooling, **gender parity** is about balancing the number of boys and girls who enrol, progress and ultimately complete their schooling.

Gender equity is not just about gender parity, nor does it mean treating all genders the same. Instead, gender equity is about understanding the inequalities and differences among learners of diverse genders and how these might affect their needs and experiences at school. For example: menstruating learners may miss school during their periods; boys may be more drawn to joining gangs; and pregnant learners may miss school because of a sense of shame. Promoting gender equity in schools means giving learners of all genders the specific tools and support they need to thrive.

GENDER-SENSITIVE VS GENDER-RESPONSIVE

A **gender-sensitive** approach shows awareness of gender roles, expectations, inequalities and relationships.

A **gender-responsive** approach goes beyond this, not only paying attention to the ways that needs and experiences are gendered, but also taking measures to reduce the harmful effects of gender norms by promoting gender equity.

GENDER-TARGETED VS GENDER-INTEGRATED

A **gender-targeted** approach targets the specific, gendered needs of boys, girls, non-binary or gender diverse learners. This may include gendered quotas for enrolment and attainment, support services for pregnant learners, or a non-gendered uniform policy.

A **gender-integrated** approach integrates gender considerations into every aspect of how schooling is planned, implemented and evaluated. This may include ensuring that textbooks promote gender equity or that teachers model non-violent behaviour.

ZERO DROPOUT CAMPAIGN'S DROPOUT PREVENTION TOOLKIT

#1

Absenteeism tracking

Data about learners' attendance and absenteeism must be collected and tracked in an ongoing, regular and systematic way. To do this, schools must:

- **Use available administrative systems to track attendance well;**
- **Regularly follow up on unexcused absences;**
- **Get learners involved in monitoring attendance; and**
- **Involve community members in tracking learners who are absent from school.**

#2

Psychosocial support system

Learners need comprehensive social and psychological support to stay in, and succeed at, school. There should be general support for all learners, but also targeted support for learners who are struggling or disengaging. To build the right support systems, schools must:

- **Develop a functional School-based Support Team (SBST);**
- **Map community support services and resources;**
- **Use and develop crucial positions such as the Learner Support Agent (LSA) and/or Child and Youth Care Worker (CYCW) to provide support services;**
- **Refer learners for support to state services; and**
- **Track the success of support interventions.**

In 2021, the Zero Dropout Campaign published a toolkit for primary and secondary schools in South Africa. The toolkit is designed to help schools, and their surrounding communities, understand and prevent dropout, offering a roadmap and best practice guide for promoting school engagement and completion. The toolkit on school dropout prevention has four cornerstones: Absenteeism tracking, psychosocial support, data analysis/Early Warning System (EWS), and partnership and stakeholder building.

#3

Data analysis/ Early Warning System (EWS)

While gathering data on absenteeism, schools also need to collect and track other elements of learner disengagement, such as academic performance, behavioural problems or mental health challenges. To do this, schools need to better understand:

- **Why tracking data on disengagement is important;**
- **The type of data to collect; and**
- **How to use data to identify learner disengagement using an Early warning System (EWS).**

#4

Partnership and stakeholder building

Schools need an open and effective communication system, involving role-players within the school and with stakeholders outside the school. With effective communication, schools can build partnerships to prevent dropout. To do this, schools must:

- **Communicate effectively with all role-players and external stakeholders about dropout prevention support; and**
- **Build multi-sectoral partnerships that will help to prevent dropout.**

By integrating gender considerations into the four cornerstones of the dropout prevention toolkit, schools can design their own gender responsive dropout prevention strategy, or at the very least, map what a gender-responsive approach could look like in their school.

HOW CAN SCHOOLS DESIGN THEIR OWN GENDER-RESPONSIVE DROPOUT PREVENTION PLAN?

To promote gender equity, schools need to be deliberate in addressing gender bias, discrimination, and violence; nurturing gender-responsive policies, programmes and monitoring systems; and mainstreaming gender issues in teacher training and curricula. They also need participation from stakeholders who can support learners' wellbeing and engagement outside the classroom.

Read on for key considerations and tips that schools can use to build their own gender-responsive dropout prevention plan.

ABSENTEEISM TRACKING

Analyse your absenteeism data to pick up whether there are gendered trends in absenteeism and disengagement, with a view to building a gender-responsive approach to reintegrating learners into class.

To do this, you will need to follow up with learners and/or their primary caregivers to find out why they are chronically absent.

TRY THIS:

- Keep a record of the reasons that parents provide to explain why their children are not in school;
- Analyse how these reasons differ according to the child's gender; and
- Use these patterns to build a gender-responsive approach to promoting attendance.

Try this method to support pregnant learners to stay connected to their schooling:

* Ensure pregnant learners have a 'written leave of absence' plan with a scheduled return date after giving birth; and
* Schedule a courtesy call ahead of the return date to check in and remind the learner/caregiver that the learner is expected back at school.

PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT SYSTEM

Effective psychosocial support for learners of all genders starts with creating an inclusive and positive climate.

TRY THIS:

- Make explicit your intention for an inclusive and positive learning environment;
- Normalise the use of language that is inclusive and caring at school;
- Ensure schools have private flush toilets and functioning sanitation facilities;
- Provide free menstrual products at school;
- Offer safe sexual and reproductive health services for all genders; and
- Encourage critical dialogue about learners' gendered experiences of school.

If your school does not have a counsellor, it is important to create protective spaces for learners to talk about their psychosocial concerns. You can do this by:

* Having a system for learners to anonymously report bullying or violence;
* Creating reporting and response mechanisms to address School-related Gender-based Violence (SRGBV);
* Intentionally developing an anti-violence and anti-bullying programme;
* Implementing institutional codes of conduct for teachers and administrative staff;
* Ensuring that school staff members receive ongoing training about non-aggressive techniques to address learner misconduct;
* Developing and implementing a school policy that supports pregnant learners to stay in school; and
* Providing services to support the parenting needs of learners.

DATA ANALYSIS/ EARLY WARNING SYSTEM (EWS)

Set gender disaggregated goals and targets for key indicators such as enrolment, attendance, retention, repetition, transition to secondary school completion and academic achievement.

TRY THIS:

- Use class and grade schedules to track progress towards gender-specific goals;
- Understand the proportion of male and female teachers at different grade levels, and be proactive about how staff might model gender inclusion; and
- Explore if there are reasons for dropout that are far more prevalent for certain genders, and use this information to shape prevention interventions.

You can do this by:

* Collecting and understanding data on the main reasons that girls and boys drop out, at different levels of education, and for different ages, if available;
* Identifying the resources required to prevent specific instances of dropout;
* Targeting the interventions to the gender and/ or grade areas identified; and
* Monitoring to see if there is a decrease in these instances and if additional prevention practices are required.

PARTNERSHIP AND STAKEHOLDER BUILDING

It is useful to identify role-players and external stakeholders that can support your school in implementing gender-responsive dropout prevention. Some of the role-players you may wish to consider in the school space are:

- The Representative Council of Learners (RCL) that can advocate for learners experiencing violence or discrimination;
- Learner Support Agents (LSAs) and/or Child and Youth Care Workers (CYCWs) of all genders who can offer mentorship and support to learners; and
- The School Governing Body (SGB) that can provide oversight of dropout prevention strategies at school, including being responsive to gendered issues.

Some of the stakeholders you may wish to consider outside of the school space are:

* Mentors and role models (like successful alumni) of all genders;
* Community stakeholders (e.g. community groups and NGOs) or local services to refer learners to who are experiencing violence, bullying or psychosocial challenges;
* After-school and community safety programmes; and
* Men/fathers and women/mothers who can participate in school activities.

Other questions to consider:

- Does teacher training include specific modules on gender-responsive teaching methods?
- Are textbooks and teaching materials screened for gender bias and stereotyping?
- Do you have a flexible uniform policy that allows learners of any gender to choose which uniform they prefer to wear?

"All learners need caring, trusting and loving adults in their lives. Whatever their gender, a child's fundamental needs are love, encouragement, motivation and being assisted in focusing on their education."

NOMFUNDISO RAFUZA
Education Programme Officer with
Masibumbane Development Organisation

Fig.9

INTEGRATING GENDER INTO DROPOUT PREVENTION: A GUIDE FOR SCHOOLS

Does your school understand the gendered reasons for disengagement and dropout?

YES

Does your school use data to inform prevention plans that can address gender-specific vulnerabilities that heighten disengagement?

YES

NO

Create systems to track and monitor disengagement among learners of all genders.

NO

Introduce an Early Warning System (EWS) to identify learners that are at high risk of dropping out.

A gender-responsive dropout prevention plan means integrating gender considerations into our approaches to tracking, supporting and safeguarding learners.

Does your school provide targeted psychosocial support that promotes a positive schooling experience for learners of all genders?

YES

Are role-players (SMT/SGB/RCL/SBST/LSAs/CYCWs, etc.) encouraged to promote gender-responsive services?

YES

Does your school have stakeholders (community organistions, after-school programmes, mentors, etc.) to refer and assist with dropout prevention?

NO

Introduce psychosocial support services that intentionally promote positive schooling experiences for all learners.

NO

Design gender-responsive policies and programming, and develop the capacity of role-players, such as school staff and learners, to implement such a policy.

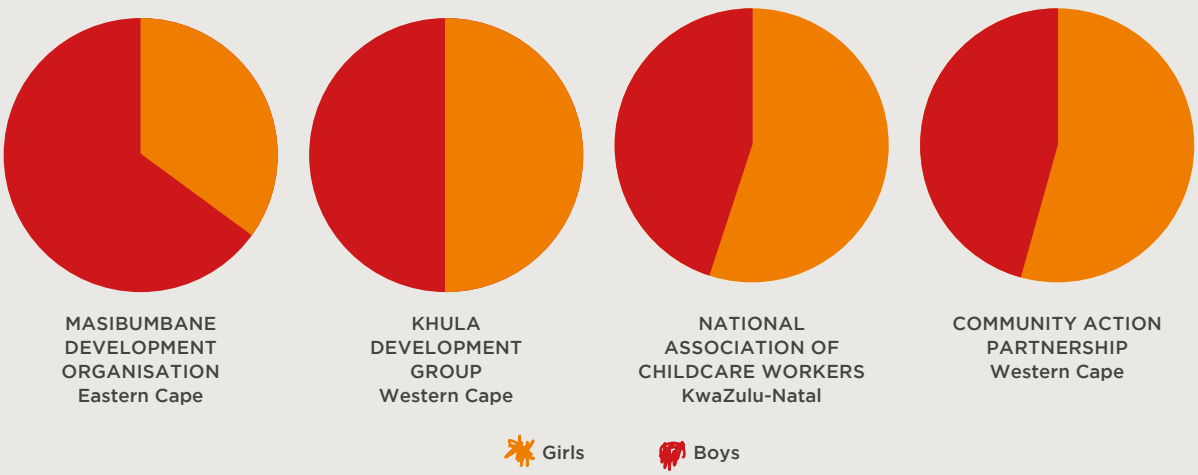
NO

Grow the school's network of stakeholders to crowd in support for issues impacting learners of all genders.

WHAT ARE OUR IMPLEMENTING PARTNERS DOING?

The Zero Dropout Campaign partners with four non-profit organisations to implement and test dropout prevention strategies across the country: Masibumbane Development Organisation (MDO); Khula Development Group (KDG); Community Action Partnership (CAP); and the National Association of Child Care Workers (NACCW). These partners are showing what it takes to help learners complete their schooling, using a combination of learner tracking and targeted psychosocial support.

Fig.10 **PARTICIPATION IN SELECT DROPOUT PREVENTION PROGRAMMES BYGENDER, 2021**



In two out of the four dropout prevention programmes, girls were more likely than boys to be enrolled. This may be due to gender stereotypes that make boy less likely to seek or accept help. However, 65% of learners referred to Masibumbane Development Organisation (MDO) are boys. MDO reports that teachers and mentors are more likely to refer boys for support, often reporting behaviour problems and patterns of chronic absenteeism as the reasons for referral.

DID YOU KNOW?

BOYS ARE OFTEN RELUCTANT TO SEEK OR ACCEPT HELP.

Due to gender stereotyping and modelled behaviours in the home or community, boys tend not to seek help or express their feelings, as this is typically viewed as a sign of weakness. Since gender stereotypes expect boys and men to be 'strong' and 'self-sufficient', especially in the presence of girls and women, many of the Zero Dropout Campaign's implementing partners reported that boys were less responsive to their support when their mentors were female.

CASE STUDY/

NACCW

PREGNANCY AND DROPOUT: BREAKING THE CYCLE

The National Association of Child Care Workers (NACCW) aims to prevent dropout by providing in-school services to vulnerable learners in the KwaZulu-Natal Midlands. Since 2017, it has reached over 1 300 learners across nine schools. As part of its Isibindi Ezikolweni programme, NACCW's Child and Youth Care Workers (CYCWs) train and capacitate Learner Support Agents (LSAs). LSAs mentor at-risk learners in schools.

ABSENTEEISM TRACKING

IDENTIFICATION

In the mornings, afternoons and break times, CYCWs look out for signs that learners might be struggling. In addition to absenteeism, they pay attention to learners who are regularly sick in the morning; show sudden changes in behaviour; often look tired; or who are always wearing a jersey, even when it's warm. Some learners are referred to CYCWs by their teachers, while others approach CYCWs themselves. In one of the schools, a Grade 10 learner approached a CYCW and disclosed that she was pregnant. She asked the CYCW to be with her when she shared the news with her family, fearing that her dad would kick her out the house. The CYCW was able to support both the learner, and her family, to move forward as a team.

MONITORING

CYCWs keep track of pregnant learners' progress, supporting them to attend school and keep up with their clinic appointments. They ensure that teachers are informed of learners' upcoming clinic days and that learners receive the day's classwork so they don't fall behind. CYCWs also conduct regular home visits (or connect with learners virtually) to support them through their pregnancy, their schoolwork, and their ultimate return to school after birth. Home visits also allow CYCWs to assess the learner's support structure and any challenges they may be facing at home. In one of the schools, the CYCW conducted a home visit for a 17-year-old Grade 11 learner who had not returned to school after giving birth. During the home visit, the CYCW learnt that there was no-one at home to care for the learner's baby as they all had to go to work. The CYCW connected with a local daycare centre and, with the learners' consent, shared the learner's challenges. The daycare centre agreed to care for the child while the learner attended school. The learner returned to class and began to show improvements in school.

EARLY WARNING SYSTEM (EWS)

Because of their proximity to learners, school-based CYCWs can identify learners who may be at risk of becoming pregnant, based on their behaviour and attendance records. These learners are then enrolled into structured programmes such as Vhutshilo, which is an HIV-prevention and sexual and reproductive health programme. The programme - open to boys and girls - teaches young people how to stay safe from sexually transmitted diseases and become confident adults.

PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT AND TRUSTING RELATIONSHIPS TO TALK ABOUT SEX

CYCWs run a range of structured support programmes. Vhutshilo aims to teach young people skills that will not only help them negotiate safer sex, but will also increase their decision-making abilities and boost their confidence. CYCWs also form Buddy Beat groups for young mothers where they discuss several topics ranging from sexual and reproductive health, to attachment, immunisation and breastfeeding.

PARTNERSHIPS AND STAKEHOLDER BUILDING

CYCWs refer pregnant learners to external stakeholders, such as clinics, for HIV counselling and testing, antenatal care and family planning services. CYCWs also run school campaigns where they invite experts (like nurses) to go to school and share information about contraception. In addition, CYCWs enlist stakeholders such as the Department of Social Development (DSD) and the South African Police Service (SAPS) to educate and inform learners about sexual abuse and sexual exploitation; how to report abuse; and how to find available support services. Finally, CYCWs run awareness campaigns that include parents and community members, and are aimed at creating awareness around teenage pregnancy and how it can impact learners' education.

CASE STUDY/

CAP
COMMUNITY ACTION PARTNERSHIP

INTEGRATING GENDER INTO PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT SERVICES

COMMUNITY ACTION PARTNERSHIP'S COLLABORATION WITH 'BOYS TO MEN'

Boys to Men offers psychosocial support for adolescent boys in Cape Town through weekend-long personal growth programmes and a series of follow-up meetings. Boys to Men Weekends, which serve as rites of passage for boys, combine outdoor adventures with activities designed to deepen participants' emotional intelligence and promote self-knowledge. These weekends are followed by regular group sessions, in which boys start to integrate what they have learnt into their everyday lives. The programme is run by a community of men who act as role models and mentors.

The Community Action Partnership (CAP) has integrated Boys to Men into its ChangeMAKERS programme. ChangeMAKERS reaches thousands of learners across six schools in Swellendam, in the Western Cape. Community-based Support Teams (CBSTs) offer assistance to teachers, schools and learners, thereby creating a network of support to help learners stay in school. Meanwhile, School-based Support Teams (SBSTs) identify at-risk learners, referring them to targeted support, like Boys to Men. In June 2021, four of the 15 learners who attended the Boys to Men weekend programme were referred through ChangeMAKERS.

HORSE-ASSISTED INTERVENTIONS

As part of its ChangeMAKERS programme, Community Action Partnership (CAP) offers a horse-assisted psychosocial support programme for at-risk learners in Swellendam. Learners are identified and referred through CAP's School-based Support Teams. Programme participants have included learners who have survived trauma and gender-based violence; as well as those grappling with depression, anxiety, bereavement or addiction. They pair counselling with horse-assisted activities to build emotional, ecological and social intelligence. As part of a therapeutic programme, participants build familiarity with their assigned horse, learn how to care for the animal and learn basic dressage (a form of horse riding performed in competitions). Learners are often enrolled in the programme alongside their parents and teachers, building a network to support the learners' wellbeing.

"If we can give boys the skills of emotional literacy - the healing can start there. Fredrick Douglas has a saying: 'It's easier to build strong teenagers than it is to heal broken men'. We teach them that it's more courageous to be vulnerable than it is to be macho and strong. When a boy can articulate his feelings, he doesn't need to self-medicate ... or abuse drugs. All those things are to hide the pain that the boy is feeling."

GARY WHEELER
Boys to Men Operations Coordinator
in an interview for Bush Radio

"One of the boys who attended our sponsored Boys to Men weekends decided during the programme that he wanted to focus on soccer. He gave up his involvement in gangs and put his mind towards soccer. Recently, he was selected to play in Spain. Another of the boys who was in a gang decided after our weekend to leave the gang and become a professional cyclist and cycling mechanic. This year, he did the Cape Town Cycle Tour. This boy lives in Lavender Hill below the gang boss, yet he broke away and helps out in Lavender Hill School with the BMX track. He's been such an inspiration that other gang members have come to him to ask him how he did it."

CHARLIE FLANAGAN
Boys to Men Co-Founder in an interview
on Bush Radio

CASE STUDY/

Masibumbane
DEVELOPMENT ORGANISATION

PAIRING AT-RISK LEARNERS WITH CARING MENTORS TO PREVENT DROPOUT

Masibumbane Development Organisation partners with the Zero Dropout Campaign to implement a Check and Connect programme, across six schools in Buffalo City. Check and Connect is a structured mentoring programme focused on learners at risk of disengagement and dropout. It uses data about individual learners as a way of preventing dropout by tracking attendance, academic performance and behaviour to identify early signs of disengagement, and connecting learners to the right support at the right time. Since 2017, Check and Connect has enrolled over 800 learners from Grades 6 to 9 each year. One of them is Noluthando*, a 17-year-old Grade 8 learner, living in Gonubie, East London.

*Name has been changed.

NOLUNTHANDO'S STORY

"In 2018, I dropped out of school for a year. It was a difficult time. I behaved badly at school because I didn't have good friends. When I dropped out, my parents were very disappointed, but they kept on encouraging me to go back. It made me feel very sad that I had disappointed them.

After I dropped out, I became a mother at 15. I don't think I would've fallen pregnant if I didn't drop out of school. But having a daughter turned things around. I knew she would look up to me and that I wouldn't have a future if I didn't go back to school. I want to be a doctor. I want my daughter to get a good education and be successful in life.

After I had my daughter, the Check and Connect Mentor helped me get back to school. She would call me almost every day and encourage me. She would tell me to come back, change how I behave and focus on my studies so I can be somebody in the future.

My mother looks after my daughter while I'm at school now. Becoming a mother changed me because before I had a child, I was always in the street visiting friends; now that I have a child, I'm always at home and I'm focusing on my studies.

Now that I'm back at school, my parents are very proud of me and encourage me not to drop out again. My favourite subjects are maths and isiXhosa. I have good teachers who I like. I like my teachers because they are always encouraging me and I understand what they teach me.

I think school is important because I'll end up in the street or working as a domestic worker if I don't focus. What I see is life's not easy for them. I feel like I got a second chance. It's easy for me to be motivated now. When I see other kids who have dropped out and haven't come back, I feel sad. When I talk to them they say that school is boring and they don't see the point of school. But I can see school is a gateway to something better."

OPINION /

CONTEXT MATTERS – THE WAY FORWARD FOR SCHOOL-BASED GENDER PROGRAMMING

Where are we now?

How has policy translated into practice?

DR ROBERT MORRELL
Office of the Vice Chancellor,
University of Cape Town

PROF. DEEVIA BHANA
South African Research Chair in
Gender & Childhood Sexuality,
University of KwaZulu-Natal

In 1997, South Africa's Gender Equity Task Team produced the country's first comprehensive survey of gender inequality in education. Now, nearly a quarter of a century later, what can we say about the gender question in South African schools?

The greatest contribution of the survey report, and the engagement that has followed it, was to offer a gendered lens to a number of social problems in schools, which has made both our understanding of them, and responses to them, more pointed. Corporal punishment, for instance, had been controversial for many years, but it was not generally considered to be a 'gender problem'. It was only by foregrounding masculinity and its links with widespread violence in South African society that corporal punishment began to receive the research attention it deserved. As another example: sexual harassment was generally considered to be relatively unimportant – a form of horse-play or inappropriate behaviour. It was only once the damage harassment inflicted, particularly on girls, began to be highlighted that the scale of the problem was recognised. Instead of being seen as aberrant behaviour, sexual harassment slowly came to be seen as a form of systemic bullying, connected to gender-based violence in schools.

Survey results showed that schools were clearly implicated in constructing gender identities and relationships. Initially, this knowledge produced a focus on the under-performance of girls in education: Why were so few girls taking science and maths? In co-educational settings, why were boys permitted by teachers to dominate classroom exchanges? Were schools complicit in producing low academic and professional expectations among female learners?

The growth of feminist research on schools and within schools fuelled policy changes that are most evident in the South African Schools Act of 1996, but also in laws that have focused on reducing gender-based violence in schools. The emphasis on gender parity in access resulted in a rapid increase in the enrolment of girls into schools. A further achievement was that girls' exist from the schooling system has been delayed – girls now stay longer in school and do better. To add to this, rates of corporal punishment have dropped, although (illegal) beatings remain common in a minority of schools.

While there have been advances, there have also been disappointments. Rates of dropout among boys have increased and now exceed female school dropout rates. The number of young women entering university now exceeds that of young men. This is a victory for gender transformation, but also a defeat. The victory lies in the concerted effort of feminists globally to push for educational access and success for girls. The defeat lies in the fact that many boys and young men now feel demotivated and some blame feminism for a situation which they see as anti-male.

In too many schools, there has been little change in daily interactions. Teachers who are themselves demotivated, harbour prejudice against pregnant learners. Some male teachers still consider schoolgirls as fair game. The gender regimes of schools – the ways in which people relate to one another – do not reflect gender equity. Rather, they mirror the local environment, including gang war, unemployment and deeply-entrenched cultural values, which can justify the subordination of women and minorities.

SO, WHAT SHOULD WE DO?

Policies that endorse gender equity at a 'high level' are important and can help shift social norms. But they are only part of the solution. Local-level interventions that work to give expression to these policies must be expanded, integrating gender responsiveness into all aspects of school life. Gender as a concept must be revitalised and expanded so that it neither excludes boys nor minimises a focus on girls. Learners of all genders need to be in the picture.

We cannot have a one-size-fits-all approach to gender intervention in schools. Rethinking gender and education requires serious attention to situational accounts and the constraints that shape gender parity at the local level. If the constraints that exist within and around schools are ignored, unreasonable expectations are made of teachers and learners.

On the next page, the authors offer proposals for school-based gender programming... →

Our interventions must be attuned to the particular contexts of schools and learners. If gender policy and programming do not grapple with these realities, they risk falling flat among the communities they are intended to benefit. Some examples of gender interventions that are contextually attuned might be:

- **Incorporating teenage fathers, and programmes on masculinity, into support interventions for pregnant and parenting learners;**
- **Unsettling gendered and cultural systems of power that construct boys as delinquents and girls as passive;**
- **Addressing the capacity of teachers to provide meaningful care and support (this would allow a more meaningful response to instances in which corporal punishment is viewed as a form of care); and**
- **Being attuned to cultural and initiation rituals that, in some parts of South Africa, signal specific capacities for boys and girls, i.e. sexual purity for girls, and normalised sexual expression for boys.**

When young men are initiated into manhood, their newfound masculinity might also rub against school cultures that position these learners as 'boys', subservient to school authorities.

The point we are making is that interventions must be driven by the realities of local settings. In South Africa, these realities are often marked by race and class inequalities, poverty and high levels of unemployment which shape gender relations within school settings. We need to embrace the promise of gender equity while, at the same time, taking seriously the life conditions of people who are the intended beneficiaries of interventions. %

"Supporting boys after they've attended initiation school is challenging as they now perceive themselves as men and demand respect, especially from females. They cannot be treated the same as other boys because they see themselves as men, thereby introducing a difficult dynamic in group activities."

NOMFUNDISO RAFUZA
Education Programme Officer with Masibumbane Development Organisation

Notes:

Policies that endorse gender equity at a 'high level' are important.

Learners of all genders need to be in the picture.

IN CONCLUSION

Across South Africa, learners are making the slow, often unsteady journey to completing their basic education.

Finishing Grade 12 widens opportunities for employment, further education, job security and earnings, improving young people's wellbeing and civic participation. But most learners have the odds stacked against them, battling disruptions at home, in the classroom, on the playground and in their neighbourhoods. As learners make their way through school, gender matters. Gender impacts learners' vulnerabilities and responsibilities; their relationships with peers, caregivers and teachers; and the types of care and attention they are likely to receive. This publication shows how gender intersects with other inequalities – including race, geography, disability and household income – to shape learners' experiences of, and disengagement from, school.

Meaningfully integrating gender into dropout prevention demands a context-specific, inclusive and intentional approach. Rather than reinforcing gender stereotypes, or working from gendered assumptions, schools would benefit from understanding the specific gender dynamics unfolding in learners' lives. As with any strong dropout prevention strategy, this means tracking, monitoring and understanding learner-level data, and noting where there are gendered trends in school disengagement. It also means creating safe and nurturing learning environments for all learners through proactive gender programming and psychosocial support. Finally, since gender inequalities are embedded in social, economic and political structures, schools, families and civil society must work together to build effective partnerships, tackling gender injustice and building networks of support around learners.

A dropout prevention plan that is responsive to gender not only promotes gender equity, but also gives learners the targeted support they need to stay in, and succeed at, school. This publication offers a framework for deepening our understanding of gender and schooling, and charting a pathway to gender-responsive dropout prevention.

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USEFUL RESOURCES

USEFUL RESOURCES FOR BUILDING GENDER-RESPONSIVE DROPOUT PREVENTION PLANS:

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WRITTEN BY

- Dr Beth Vale

EDITED BY

- Rahima Essop and Esther Etkin

DESIGN AND LAYOUT BY

- Penny Waterkeyn

ILLUSTRATIONS BY

- Katherine Horn

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ZERO DROPOUT

The Zero Dropout Campaign is working towards halving the rate of school dropout by 2030.

Get in touch with us:
RAHIMA ESSOP: Head of Communications and Advocacy
info@zerodropout.co.za
+27 (0)21 670 9840

THE CAMPAIGN AGAINST SCHOOL DROPOUT

Although at least 40% of all young people in South Africa drop out of school, there is no national task force focused on addressing this crisis. The vision of the Zero Dropout Campaign is to halve the rate of school dropout by 2030 – which requires a collaborative effort targeting a range of actions that can prevent and intervene in school dropout. Towards this end, the Zero Dropout Campaign pursues four strategies to ensure school dropout is firmly on the national agenda with a clear pathway for significant change:

1 / Driving a powerful public advocacy agenda focused on mobilising a range of actors to take action on school dropout;

2 / Developing an accelerated learning programme focused on the rapid catch-up of skills that enable reading for meaning to address underlying learning backlogs that contribute to learner dropout;

3 / Supporting the development and mobilisation of a network of schools committed to Zero Dropout; and

4 / Piloting innovative approaches to reducing dropout and learning from the implementation experience.

We believe that a co-ordinated response to school dropout must begin with accurate data tracking of individual learners, together with evidence-based interventions aimed at reducing learner risk and increasing learner engagement to prevent school dropout.

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DGMT is a South African foundation built on endowments from Douglas George Murray and his wife, Eleanor. DGMT is committed to developing South Africa's potential through public innovation and strategic investment. Our goal for South Africa is a flourishing people, economy and society. Towards this end DGMT currently distributes about R160-million per year and leverages and manages a similar amount of funding through joint ventures with other investors.

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