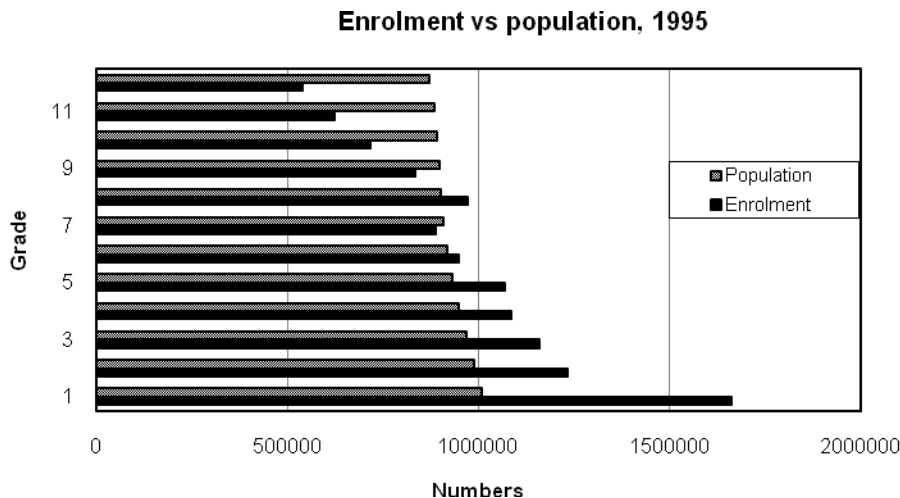


What's right with South African schools?

Nick Taylor

This article is dedicated to the many South African teachers and education officials who not only slave away under difficult conditions trying to educate our children, who not only labour under government policy which is quite inimical to building the developmental state we all long for, but also suffer indiscriminate insults from public opinion.

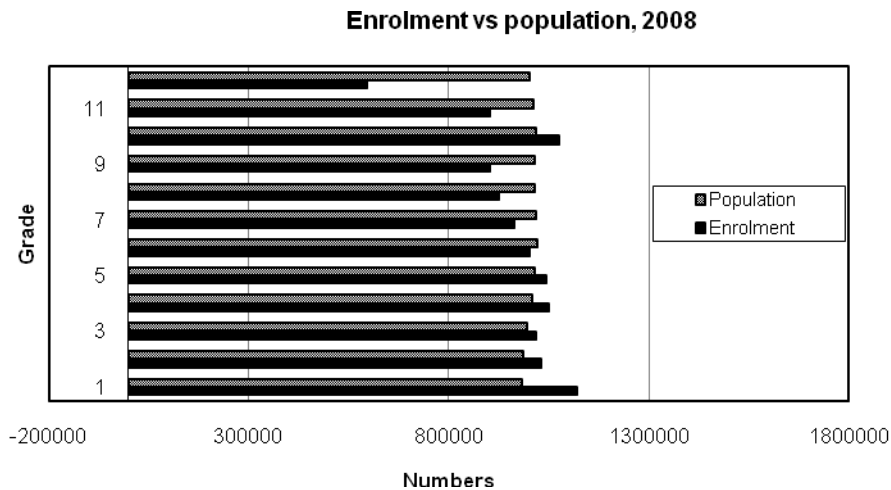
Take school enrolment, for example. A very common criticism among commentators who should know better is to compare Grade 1 enrolment of 1.65 m in 1995 with Grade 12 enrolment of 540 000 and lament the 'dropout' of 1.1 million children. 'What a waste!' they cry. This provides yet another reason for them to bash government and the Dept of Education in particular. Actually, the situation is just the opposite: this is one of the good news stories of the last 15 years. Because, if we compare school enrolment by grade with the population of each respective grade cohort, we see that in 1995 the number of children in school actually exceeded the population by some margin for the first few grades, most notably in Grade 1, where over-enrolment stood at 165% of the age cohort.



Source: Crouch, 2010

How can this be? Well, in the absence of preschools in the eighties and nineties, parents would 'park' their 5-, 4- and even 3-year olds in primary schools, using these as cheap baby-sitting facilities. These children, not ready to benefit socially or intellectually from schooling, would 'churn' in and out of the system for a two or three years before making some progress through the grades. Repeaters also contributed to the problem, but by far the biggest factor was underage enrolment. Besides diverting valuable resources away from improving the quality of schooling for those children mature enough to benefit from it, these underage learners clogged up the pipeline, making teaching and learning even more difficult. It was only towards the middle and top end of high school that the number of enrolments actually dropped below the age-appropriate population.

By the end of the first decade of the 21st Century the picture is quite different. Thanks largely to stricter application of school-age regulation, together with the rapid expansion of the preschool system, enrolments are now much closer to the age cohorts at all grade levels. These effects are the result of smart policy choices by the Department of Education, and effective implementation by officials, principals and teachers across the country.



Source: Crouch, 2010

While there is still some over-enrolment in the primary grades, due to the same factors as before, this has been drastically reduced, resulting in a much more manageable system and more efficient use of resources. In Grade 1, for example, over-enrolment has dropped from 165% of the population in 1995 to 114% in 2008. At the same time, the numbers of children who continue their schooling into the last three years of high school have increased markedly from 71% to 85%, another important achievement for the post-apartheid government.

We know that the quality of schooling received by all our children is far too low, but there is little doubt that the poor quality of our school system is the result of the rapid expansion of opportunities to virtually all our children in the last 40 years. Commenced under the apartheid government – for all the wrong reasons – and continued after 1994, school enrolment has grown from around 30% in 1970 to over 90% today. This is the fastest growth of any school system anywhere in the world. Unfortunately, and quite understandably, quality has been a casualty of this growth.

A second common target of criticism of our school system is the idea that quality has declined in the last 16 years. This may be true, but to date we have found no evidence to support this claim. In fact, all the international tests in which South Africa participates, as well as the results of independent internal measures, indicate that the national average performance of our learners has remained absolutely flat over this period (with improvements in some provinces and declines in others). In the meantime, exponential growth in the overall numbers of citizens receiving schooling up to at least Grade 7 ensures that the problem of adult illiteracy is being eliminated at source. Most countries count Grade 4 or 5 as

being sufficient to ensure functionally literate adults. If we assume that, because of the poor quality delivered by our school system, we require 7 years of schooling to entrench basic reading and writing skills, then adult literacy has improved from under 50% among those currently in their sixties, to over 90% among twenty-year olds today. This is a very significant consequence of the expansion of school places in this period.



Source: Gustafsson, van der Berg, Shepherd and Burger, 2009

It is quite true that the quality of knowledge and skills produced by our school system is very low, that the behavior of many teachers is unacceptable, even criminal, and that the principles generally used by government to recruit and promote civil servants is antithetical to effective service delivery. I will be writing about these topics in subsequent articles in this series. In the meantime, spare a thought for the thousands of educators, at all levels of the system, who are doing a heroic job against all the odds, including the abuse of ill informed critics.

Dr Taylor is Senior Research Fellow at JET Education Services. He writes in his personal capacity.

An abbreviated version of this article appeared in The Times on 17 February 2010. see:

<http://www.timeslive.co.za/opinion/article311440.ece>