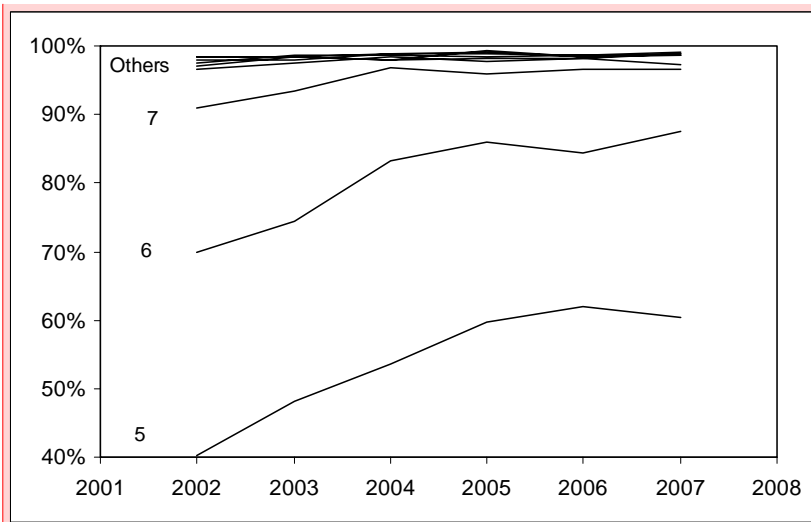


## Fruitless debates based on bad information

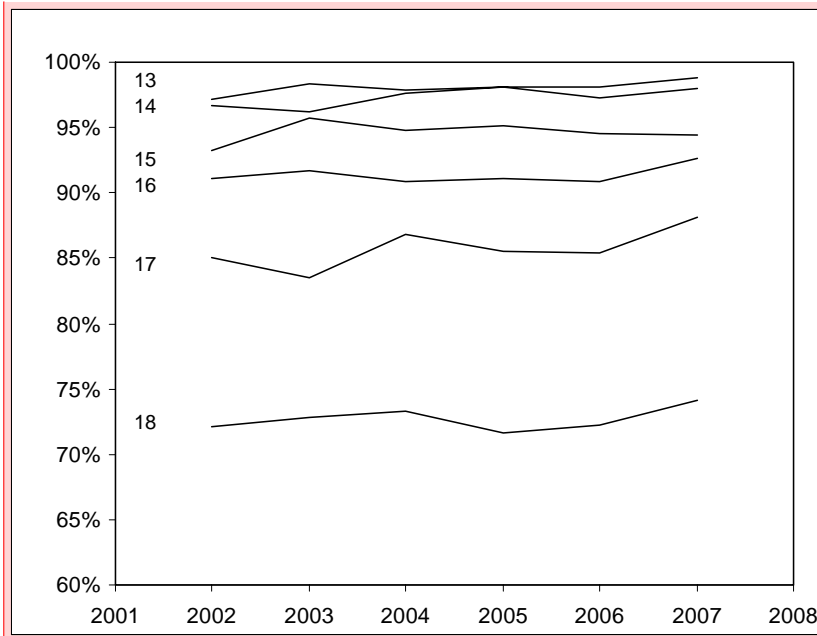
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Every now and then South Africa's education opinion leaders seem to get caught up in fruitless debates based on bad information, or badly-digested information. The tendency to misunderstand the nature of the issues seems to have erupted again, recently, with debates around dropout issues. But the evidence is so clear, so strong, and so easily accessible, that negligence to base one's opinions on the evidence borders either on mendacity or academic sloppiness. To put it simply: South Africa offers her youth huge amounts of educational opportunity. In the grades, and for the age groups, where what's on offer has been high, there has been no decline. In the grades, and for the age groups, where the quality of what's on offer is not good enough, there have been steady and reasonable improvements. One simple fact tells a lot: the average South African youth currently attends some form of educational institution for 16.2 years (sometimes called the schooling life expectancy), and this has improved by 1.2 years just in the last 10 years.

The first graph below shows how enrolment has been steadily high for most children of school-going age, but shows a decided improvement for the youngest children, as the system creates more Early Childhood Development (ECD) opportunities. This is not due merely to a relaxation of the age of entry. The second graph shows the same at the other, secondary, end: high and steady enrolment in the ages of traditionally high enrolment, and growth amongst the age groups (16, 17, and 18) that have traditionally had lower enrolment.

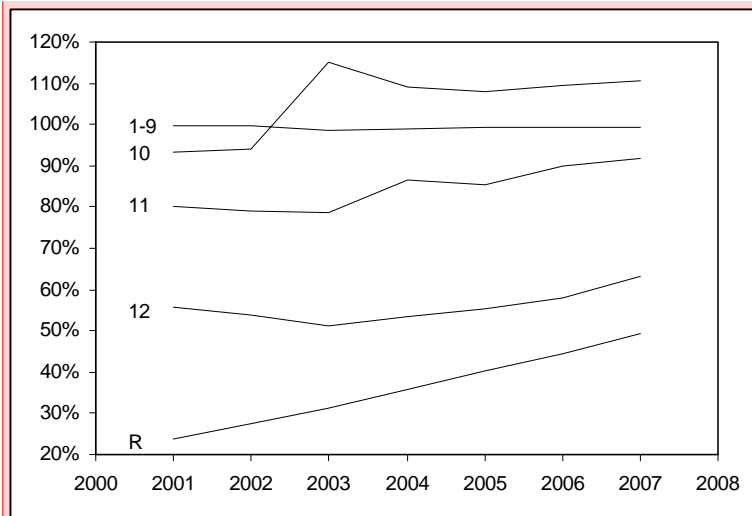


**Comment [lc1]:** This fig is referred to as Fig 1 in the Excel sheet. You may need to search a bit through the Excel sheets to find the figures, but they are all there.



Comment [lc2]: This is referred to as fig 2.

The next graph shows the percentages of the appropriate age groups that are enrolled, by age. Again, for the traditionally highly-enrolled grades 1 to 9, the data are high (essentially 100%) and steady. For the traditionally less-enrolled grades R, 10, 11, and 12, the data show an upward progression, particularly in the last few years.



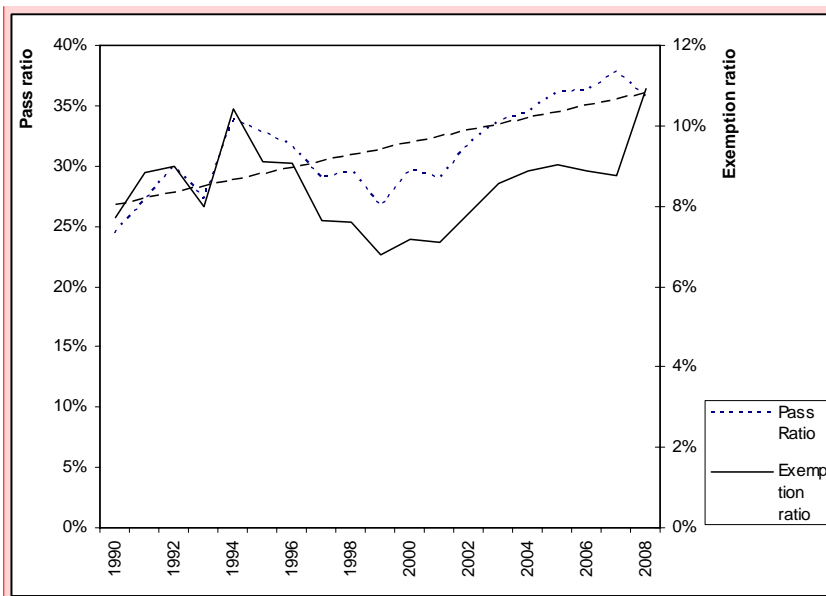
Comment [lc3]: This is referred to as fig 3

Many of the failures in understanding these issues in South Africa relate to a simple problem: not comparing the education data to population data. Some commentators look at enrolment in, say, Grade 5 at a given point in time, compare it to enrolment in Grade 1 five years before, notice that the Grade 5 is much lower, and come to mistaken conclusions about dropping out, not realizing that Grade 1 enrolment is perhaps 30% higher than the population of appropriate age, because Grade 1 has traditionally been “bloated” due to the absence of ECD opportunities. Hence it is a serious mistake to simply look at these figures without reference to the population to be served. Another likely mistake is to look at Grade 1 enrolment in the last few years, notice it has been declining, and then fret or denounce things loudly. But the reality is that as ECD opportunities have increased, enrolment in Grade 1 has been reduced, and that is actually a good thing, because, again, much of the previous enrolment in Grade 1 was simply spillover due to the lack of ECD. Such mistakes abound. For reporters and the general public to make such mistakes is understandable. For education experts to propound such mistakes, and thus to mislead the press and the public, is inexcusable.

Some will ask about whether, along with the increase in enrolment at the secondary level, there has also been an increase in matric passes. The answer is yes, and this increase has been fairly dramatic, particularly if one takes a long view.<sup>1</sup> The South African media and popular opinion are obsessed with the matric pass rate, but this is actually a poor indicator, because it is highly affected by the numbers who sit the exam, and the numbers who sit the exam are highly variable and susceptible to all kinds of sociological and economic pressures. Again, the trick is to look at educational variables in relation to something

<sup>1</sup> In 1974 6 000 Africans wrote and 3 000 passed the Senior Certificate exams.

fundamental and bedrock in nature, such as the population of 18 year olds, rather than something flimsy, such as the numbers who sit. When looked at this way, the increases are clear. The following graphic takes the passes and exemptions as a proportion of the population of 18 year olds, which we call the pass and exemption ratios, and it shows a clear upward trend. The dotted line shows the pass ratio, the solid line the exemption ratio, and the dashed line is simply the trend in the pass ratio, which is clearly up. True, having only 35% or so of the population of young adults enter life with a matric pass is too low, and improving only 10 or so percentage points in 18 years is also insufficient, but the trend is up.



**Comment [Ic4]:** This is fig 4, note it is in a different Excel file, appropriately labelled.

Finally, some might note that even this use of the matric data is incorrect, because this examination does not have proper anchor questions that allow one to calibrate the difficulty year on year so the papers are of exactly the same difficulty level. But one can have recourse to international exams to see whether it might be true, as some critics have argued, that quality is down. It turns out that South Africa has participated (with sufficient rigor to report upon) in three of the “big” international exams in the last 10 years or so, the international maths and science exams in 1999 and 2003, and the reading exam in 2006. In all of these, South Africa has scored at about 55% of the international average: a few insignificant points up or down and without trend. Thus, while the level of learning is certainly something to be seriously concerned about, it would be quite incorrect to claim that, at least since 1999, learning levels have come down.

In short, there is a tendency in South Africa to worry about the wrong things. Enrolment in general is up and very high—youth get more than 16 years of schooling, on average. The dropout rate before Grade 10 is extremely low. The dropout rate after Grade 10 is higher, but not out of line with that of other countries at similar levels of development, and has been improving consistently. Learning levels as indicated by the pass ratio are up, though still unacceptably low. Learning levels as indicated by participation in international assessments are very low—however, they hardly trend downward. The biggest problem in South Africa, now and for the past decades, is that many of the children who are enrolled do not learn nearly enough and do not learn fast enough—but they *never* have, and there is no evidence whatsoever to suggest that children are learning less these days.