Inaccuracies in Zero Dropout's op-ed on school participation trends

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Zero Dropout, a South African group specialising in research and advocacy around dropping out from schools, released on op-ed in March 2022 on News24 titled 'Knowledge is power: Real-time data on school dropout needed'. There are several serious inaccuracies and omissions in the article.

First, the portrayal of the basic education sector's information systems is inaccurate. Since the formal replacement in 2017 of the Tenth Day Head Count, also known as the Snap Survey, with systems capturing the details of individual learners, virtually all education statistics have been based on underlying data at the level of individual people. Zero Dropout's article creates, in parts, the impression that this transition to individual-level data has not occurred. This transition was partly necessary to reduce the risk that enrolment numbers would be manipulated by provinces in order to secure more funding through the Treasury's equitable share formula. Since 2017, Treasury has used data from the Learner Unit Record Information and Tracking System (LURITS).

LURITS is a national data warehouse which serves multiple purposes. It is acknowledged that aspects of it need further improvement. Above all, the system's own learner identifiers are not always consistently used, especially when learners move from one school to another, often after Grade 7, or from one province to another. However, the thirteen-digit national identity number, also uploaded on LURITS is often able to fill this gap. Around 92% of learners in recent years have a national ID number on LURITS. This situation has gradually been improving. The Department of Basic Education (DBE) works routinely with the Department of Home Affairs to confirm the validity of identity numbers on LURITS.

Day-to-day attendance is not currently uploaded on LURITS, which focusses on enrolments, but attendance is captured in the South African School Administration and Management System (SA-SAMS), used by 99% of schools outside Western Cape – in Western Cape a different system, CEMIS, is used. Current plans envisage attendance data being regularly transferred from SA-SAMS to LURITS.

Zero Dropout ignores the role of SA-SAMS in monitoring attendance, and by implication diminishing attendance and ultimately dropping out. Instead, they argue for the use of an 'Early Warning System' (EWS) to monitor dropping out in schools. What the article does not explain is that an EWS is something that Zero Dropout has invested some effort in developing and promoting in the South African context. A very rudimentary Excel tool is available on the Zero Dropout website. This tool requires a user at a school to enter basic information on each learner's attendance, behaviour and academic results with a view to assessing each learner's risk of dropping out. The idea is an interesting one, which has been promoted internationally by UNICEF, but these tools have not been subject to any rigorous analysis of whether their predictions are accurate or, if they are, whether predictions change the behaviour of people in a school.

The EWS standalone tool that Zero Dropout promotes is a completely different thing to the extensive backbone of systems, built up over the years, which monitor attendance. In the case of South Africa this is largely SA-SAMS. In 2022, the capturing of attendance on SA-SAMS, already high in public schools, will become mandatory. There are important debates around how SA-SAMS could be strengthened, not just with respect to the monitoring of learner attendance, but also with respect to its other functions. Zero Dropout makes no contribution to this debate in their article.

Turning to the question of what has occurred to school participation during the pandemic, the article is also problematic. It makes reference to the May 2021 NIDS-CRAM finding that an additional half a million learners were out of school, relative to a normal year. However, Zero Dropout confuses total dropping out, which includes regular and historical dropping out, with *additional* dropping out arising from the pandemic. What the writers of the article seem unaware of are subsequent arguments by the NIDS-CRAM authors speculating that much of the phenomenon observed in May 2021 is likely to be 'extended absenteeism' during the pandemic.

The Zero Dropout article dismisses the reliability of the DBE's comparison of enrolments across 2020 and 2021, while ignoring that report's explanation of mechanisms in place to prevent the counting of 'ghost' learners. The article also ignores three important and additional releases which confirm the finding that, contrary to what almost everyone expected, on the whole dropping out *declined* during the pandemic, in particular at the secondary level. It did not increase. The first of these is the 2021 National Senior Certificate results. The public examinations saw the largest ever number of full-time candidates writing the examinations, at 704 021, against an average of 532 000 per year over the previous four years. This was not unconnected from the pandemic. Promotion practices between Grade 11 in 2020 and Grade 12 in 2021, in response to the pandemic, saw an unprecedented number of youths enter Grade 12. Not only did the number of candidates increase, the number of passes and recipients of a Bachelors-level pass were respectively 30% and 45% above the average across the previous four years.

The second key piece of information is the *School Realities* reports for 2020 and 2021, released by the DBE at the start of 2022. These statistical publications confirm that an increase in grades 8 to 12 secondary level enrolments which began in 2019, before the pandemic, continued unabated up to at least 2021. This increase was 11%, or half a million learners, between 2018 and 2021. This would largely be due to reduced dropping out at the secondary level. These trends are truly unexpected, and need to be analysed further, for instance by analysts at Zero Dropout.

The third is Statistics South Africa's report on the 2020 General Household Survey, which confirms that beyond age 15 school participation was higher in 2020 than in 2019, a phenomenon that has surprised many, given that the general expectation was that the pandemic would impact negatively on school participation across the board.

Since Zero Dropout published its article, the DBE has released a detailed report on *attendance*, as opposed to enrolment, data. These are the data collected through SA-SAMS. This analysis confirms that losses in contact time during the pandemic have been devastating, but also rather unequal. These losses lie behind well-documented accounts of losses in actual learning. Yet the data all point to *permanent* dropping out having declined, not risen, during the pandemic.

This does not mean that the pandemic has had no negative impact on the engagement by children and youths with schools. As the DBE's enrolment report explains, enrolments at the start of 2021 were around 50 000 lower than expected, with half of this being due to delayed first-time enrolment in grades R and 1. However, the *net* picture is one of less dropping out, mainly due to higher levels of retention at the secondary level.

Zero Dropout calls for a key performance indicator monitoring dropping out. The DBE has for years reported against such an indicator, which is expressed as follows in the five-year sector plan: The percentage of youths who obtained a National Senior Certificate from a school. The 2021 national examinations report indicates that currently around 57% of youths successfully complete Grade 12, up from 45% in 2005. To put it crudely, this means around 43% of youths are 'drop-outs' currently in the sense that they do not obtain the Matric. Yet this is a crude way

of putting it, as this does not take into account the (still rather low) numbers of youths entering colleges before they obtain the Matric.

Strictly speaking, and using UNESCO's definitions, dropping out is always specific to one grade, not to the schooling system as a whole. Problems with the consistency of learner identifiers in SA-SAMS and LURITS mean that dropout rates by grade cannot be calculated accurately using these data. The requirements are so stringent, requiring the consistency of learner identifiers to be virtually 100%, that to my knowledge no developing country gets this right. However, household data do permit the calculation of rates of a sufficient level of reliability to inform the policy debates. The DBE has published grade-specific dropout rates based on household data.

Dropping out is an important and complex matter. Attaining zero dropping out is a worthwhile goal, but as evidence from around the world shows, the process is a long and arduous one. South Africa's current rate of successful completion of twelve years of schooling is around average by middle income standards. And as shown above, South Africa's critical indicator in this regard has been moving in the right direction. A key factor that keeps learners in school in success with their schoolwork. Reducing dropping out is thus integrally tied up with the task of making further improvements to learning and teaching in schools, keeping in mind that this too had been moving in the right direction for over a decade, at least up to the start of the pandemic.