

## EDUCATION

# Government must give a helping hand to learners who drop out

Bongekile Macupe 18 Sep 2020



*We cannot simply accept that 75 000 young people or more have dropped out of school this year and that life continues as normal — we need to give them opportunities (Madelene Cronje/M&G)*

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**I**n 2014 I covered a story in Kuruman in the Northern Cape about thousands of children who were not attending school after the community of the John Taolo Gaetsewe district had shut down all schools for more than three months.

The community did this because it was calling for a tarred road.

When it became clear that schools were not going to open any time soon, some of the learners — who were older and in high school — decided that they were done with school and went on to work in farms in Upington.

The parents were heartbroken by their children's decision because they hoped for a better future for them, but there was nothing they could do: the leaders of the protests were adamant that schools would be closed until they saw evidence of the road being constructed.

On one of my visits I spoke to a young man who had gone to work at a farm and had returned home after hearing that schools were likely to be opened again. He had bought himself a

cellphone and a pair of sneakers with the money he had earned at the farm.

A woman whose daughter had not returned from the farm shared how she feared that her daughter — who was 22 and in grade 10 at the time — would never return to school, even when they opened again, because she felt she was too old to be at school and had tasted money.

Earlier this month, the **department of basic education's** director-general, **Mathanzima Mveli**, told the parliamentary portfolio committee on basic education that the department projected about 75 000 grade seven and 12 learners would drop out of school this year.

This, of course, is as a consequence of schools being closed for months as a measure to limit the spread of **Covid-19**.

Mveli said KwaZulu-Natal would be most affected and that it was estimated that 57 249 learners from the province would drop out.

I've recently spoken to principals and teachers who've said that they cannot account for many of their learners after the lockdown and have no idea if they will return.

Some had gone as far as contacting the parents only to discover that the contact details that had been provided to the school no longer apply; others had found that children, especially those from urban areas, had been moved to rural areas by their parents.

Some school leaders have said that girl learners had fallen pregnant and indicated that they were no longer coming back to school.

This should not be surprising, even though it is of serious concern. It was expected that when learners are not at school for a very long time having them drop out, moving to other parts of the country or falling pregnant and abandoning their schooling was an eventuality.

Governments had to put measures in place to stop the spread of the coronavirus and closing schools was one of these, but unfortunately this has come at a devastating cost for those thousands of learners who are likely to be lost from the system forever.

But perhaps it is also important for the state to say what measures have been put in place to ensure that these youngsters are not completely lost from the education or skills development system.

We cannot just accept that so many children will now be left on the streets with no prospects of any form of education, training or learning a skill to better their lives.

The drop-out phenomenon has always been there and has not materialised only as a result of Covid-19. Surely by now mechanisms need to exist that help to trace these youngsters, so that they do not become statistics of those who are not in education, training or employment.

We cannot simply accept that 75 000 young people or more have dropped out of school this year and that life continues as normal. History will judge us harshly.

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