Crossroads of Opportunity and Exclusion: Determinants of School Participation Beyond Compulsory Education in South Africa

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Abstract

Participation in education beyond the compulsory phase is determined by demographic, socioeconomic, and contextual inequalities. In South Africa, educational equity remains central to the national development agenda, however longitudinal evidence on participation in the post-compulsory phase remains limited. This paper examines school participation among youth aged 16 to 18 years using repeated cross-sectional nationally representative data from the South Africa General Household Survey from 2002 to 2022. Drawing from Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory and the household production framework, the study uses descriptive statistics and pooled multivariate logistic regression to analyse patterns of school attendance over time. The descriptive findings indicate that overall attendance increased from 83.1% in 2002 to 86.8% in 2022. The regression results show that school participation declines significantly with age, with older learners having lower attendance rates. Adolescents without disabilities had significantly higher school attendance, as the odds of attending school were more than twice as high for adolescents without disabilities relative to those with disabilities (OR = 2.416; $p < 0.001$). Lower participation is also associated with female gender, parental loss, residence on farms, larger household size, and reduced access to household services. The results show that while participation rates have improved in the post-compulsory education phase, significant elements of exclusion remain. The paper argues for greater policy attention to retention, impartial support, and more responsive academic and vocational pathways for young people at a critical point between schooling, employment, and adulthood.

Keywords: post-compulsory education, school participation, educational inequality, South Africa, youth transitions

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Introduction

School participation in the upper secondary phase constitutes a critical stage in the educational trajectories of young people. This is a complex development stage that includes the transition into adulthood. During this period, adolescents are faced with increasing pressures from household conditions, social vulnerability, labour market uncertainty, and uneven access to educational opportunities. In many countries, upper secondary education begins at the age of 15 and continues onwards (Harland, 1988). In South Africa, students enter post-secondary education when they turn 15 or when they reach the ninth grade, whichever occurs first (Taylor et al., 2010). During this schooling phase, pressures occur within a wider context of persistent inequality and differentiated educational outcomes. Importantly, the post-compulsory phase is key to understanding youth participation and exclusion. The literature indicates that continued schooling beyond compulsory education is influenced by demographic, household, school, and structural factors (Castejón et al., 2022). Studies in South Africa demonstrate that school progression and dropout are affected by poverty, poor school quality, delayed grade progression, and unequal educational resources (Branson et al., 2014; Fleisch et al., 2010; Spaull, 2013; Van der Berg, 2008). Furthermore, research points to the significance of disability, parental support, gendered responsibilities, and differentiated post-school pathways (Filmer, 2008; Grant & Hallman, 2008; Houtenville & Conway, 2008; Papier & Needham, 2022; Seginer, 2006). Unequal social conditions also affect youth transitions (Gayle, 2005; Heinz, 2009; Irwin & Nilsen, 2018). It is imperative to investigate the factors that influence school attendance during the post-compulsory schooling phase to inform policies that cater to the needs of older adolescents (Showers, 2025). Current policies mainly target children in the compulsory schooling phase, so it is important that research now focuses on studying the dynamics of school participation among youths to better inform policies and programmes.

Research Objectives

1. To examine trends in school participation among South African youth aged 16 to 18 years between 2002 and 2022.
2. To describe patterns of school attendance across selected demographic, household, and contextual characteristics.
3. To identify the factors associated with school attendance in the post-compulsory phase using pooled multivariate logistic regression.

Theoretical Framework

This study uses Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory together with the household production framework. Bronfenbrenner's theory proposes that young people's educational participation is shaped by multiple layered environments and relationships, including the household, broader social settings, and structural contexts (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The ecological perspective is particularly relevant because school participation among youth aged 16 to 18 years correlates with demographic, household, and contextual factors. The microsystem encompasses variables such as age, gender, disability, and parental survival; the exosystem includes household size and access to services; and the macrosystem involves race and area of residence (De Wet & Osman, 2018). The household production framework reinforces this by highlighting that schooling partly depends on how households allocate limited resources to children's education (Ahmad, 2005). Collectively, these frameworks provide a basis for analyzing how individual, household, and contextual factors relate to school participation during South Africa's post-compulsory education phase.

Methodology

This study is characteristic of quantitative research and uses a repeated cross-sectional design based on South Africa's General Household Survey questionnaires between 2002 and 2022. The analytic focus is on adolescents aged 16 to 18 years who are in or out of the post-compulsory phase of schooling. The study uses descriptive and inferential statistics and uses a pooled multivariate logistic regression to examine school participation trends from 2002 to 2022.

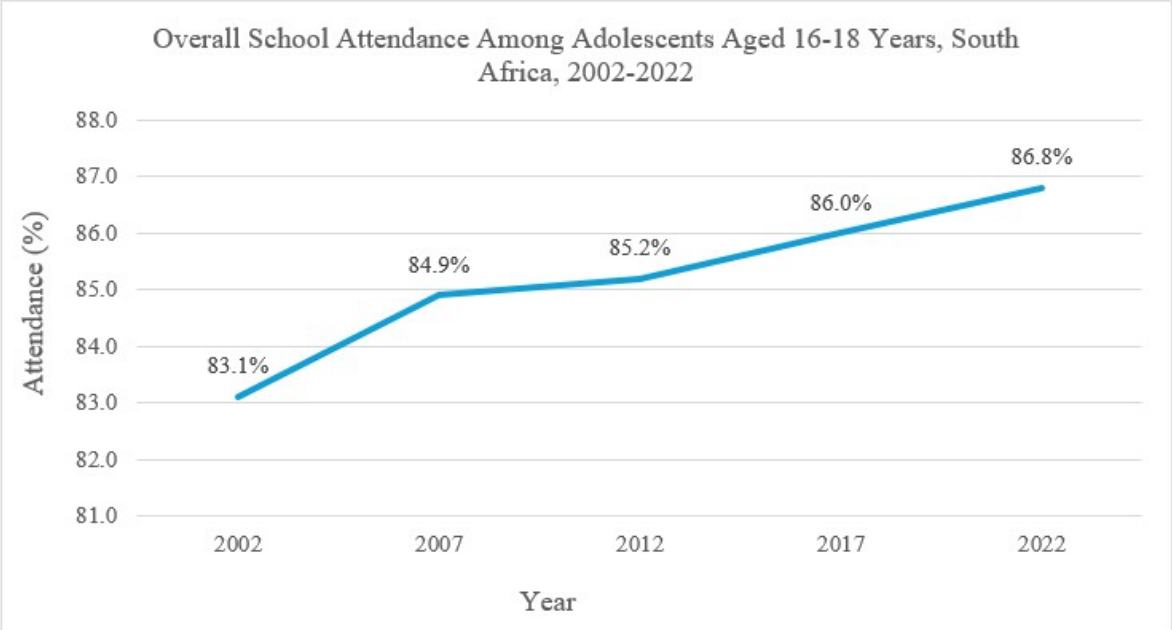
Empirical analysis was conducted in three phases. First, descriptive statistics were used to profile the weighted study population across sociodemographic and household characteristics. The inferential analysis included a weighted pooled logistic regression model to estimate associations between school attendance and selected individual, household, and contextual variables across all survey years.

The pooled multivariate logistic regression model was estimated using survey logistic regression and included 28,425 observations, representing a population size of 15,356,009. The model was statistically significant overall, with $F(29, 11104) = 56.45$ and $p < 0.001$.

Research Findings

Figure 1

Overall Trends of School Attendance, 2002–2022



According to data from the General Household Survey (GHS), South Africa observed a notable increasing trend in school enrolment among its youth aged 16–18 between 2002 and 2022. The percentage of the population enrolled in school rose from 83.1% in 2002 to 86.8% in 2022. This highlights a 3.7% percentage point increase in youth enrolled in educational institutions over the two decades. However, there was a slight dip in 2012 (85.2%) before reaching its highest point in 2022. The GHS indicates a positive trend towards increased school enrolment over two decades. A smaller proportion of the population is not attending school, suggesting potential improvements in access to education or a growing appreciation for formal schooling over time.

Descriptive Analysis of School Participation Trends

The descriptive analysis shows that school attendance among adolescents aged 16 to 18 years improved gradually over the study period. Overall attendance increased from 83.1% in 2002 to 84.9% in 2007, 85.2% in 2012, 86.0% in 2017, and 86.8% in 2022. This pattern indicates moderate progress over time, although the increase was not substantial. Age-based variation is pronounced across the period. In 2022, attendance was 95.0% among 16-year-olds, 91.1% among 17-year-olds, and 72.8% among 18-year-olds. This age gradient is consistent across the survey years and indicates that later adolescence remains a period when participation declines substantially. Descriptive results also show differences by gender. Male attendance was 86.0% in 2002 and 86.6% in 2022, while female attendance rose from 80.1% in 2002 to 87.0% in 2022. Although these percentages indicate convergence over time, multivariate analysis reveals that gender remains significant after adjustment for other factors. Substantial variation is evident across population groups. In 2022, attendance was 87.7% among African adolescents, 75.5% among coloured adolescents, 86.5% among Indian adolescents, and 92.3% among White adolescents. These differences point to continuing inequalities in post-compulsory school participation. Disability status is also strongly associated with attendance. Attendance among adolescents with disabilities rose from 48.2% in 2002 to 82.7% in 2022, while attendance among those without disabilities remained consistently higher, reaching 87.0% in 2022. Although this trend indicates improvement, the disparity remains significant. Household service variables also show uneven participation. Adolescents living in households with electricity had higher attendance rates than those without electricity, and attendance was lower in households without formal rubbish removal. These patterns suggest that household living conditions remain relevant to school participation in the post-compulsory phase.

Pooled Multivariate Logistic Regression Analysis

The pooled multivariate logistic regression analysis gives an account of the factors associated with school attendance when multiple predictors are considered simultaneously. The model was statistically significant overall and based on a large, weighted sample, supporting the robustness of the estimates. Age was the strongest predictor of school attendance. Compared to 16-year-olds, 17-year-olds had 51.3% lower odds of attending (OR = 0.487), and 18-year-olds had 82.1% lower odds (OR = 0.179). This shows retention declines as adolescents advance through post-compulsory education. Gender also remained significant in the pooled model. Female adolescents had lower odds of attending school than males (OR = 0.841), equivalent to approximately 16% lower odds of attendance. This result indicates that gendered disadvantage persists even when other household and contextual factors are considered. The results also indicate differences in school attendance across population groups. Coloured adolescents had significantly lower odds of attendance than African adolescents (OR = 0.379), while Indian adolescents exhibited lower odds with weaker statistical significance. These findings indicate that post-compulsory educational participation remains socially differentiated. Disability status had one of the largest effects in the model. Adolescents without disabilities had 2.416 times higher odds of attending school than those with disabilities. This result identifies disability as a determinant of school participation. Parental survival was significantly associated with school attendance. Adolescents whose fathers were deceased had lower odds of attendance (OR = 0.769), while those whose mothers were deceased had an odds ratio of 0.842. These findings suggest that parental absence correlates with reduced educational continuity. Household size also had a negative association with attendance. Compared with smaller households, adolescents in households with 7 to 9 members had lower odds of attendance (OR = 0.842), and those in households with 10 or more members had still lower odds (OR = 0.734). These

estimates suggest that household crowding and resource pressure may constrain continued participation in schooling. Household infrastructure variables were similarly important. The absence of electricity significantly reduced attendance odds by 44.1%, while the absence of formal rubbish removal reduced them by 40.2%. These conditions reflect household deprivation in the South African context. Geography remained significant in the pooled model. Adolescents living in traditional areas had 17% higher odds of attendance than those in urban areas, whereas adolescents living on farms had 55% lower odds than their urban counterparts. These results indicate that locational inequalities continue to influence participation in post-compulsory schooling.

Discussion

The descriptive and pooled multivariate analyses indicate that school participation among South African adolescents aged 16 to 18 years improved between 2002 and 2022; however, the pattern of improvement remained uneven. Aggregate attendance increased gradually over time, but participation remained influenced by age, gender, disability, parental survival, household conditions, and geography. The age gradient is especially significant. The marked decline in attendance among 18-year-olds indicates that late adolescence remains an essential point of educational discontinuity. This finding corresponds with South African research demonstrating that progression becomes increasingly fragile in upper grades and that dropout risk is closely associated with delayed progression and educational disadvantage (Lam et al., 2011).

The findings regarding disability indicate that inclusion in the post-compulsory phase remains incomplete. Although attendance among adolescents with disabilities improved over time, regression analysis shows that disability remains strongly associated with lower school participation. This is consistent with research demonstrating that disability is linked to substantial educational disadvantage in developing contexts (Mitra et al., 2013). The significance of parental survival, household size, electricity access, and rubbish removal indicates that post-compulsory school participation is deeply embedded in family and household conditions (Matheson & Woodward, 2014). These outcomes support the household production perspective, which conceptualizes educational participation as dependent on the distribution of material and social resources within households (Lehohla, 2017). They also corroborate ecological approaches that situate educational behaviour within interrelated social environments. The geographic results further show that educational opportunity remains spatially differentiated (Mishra et al., 2023). Farm residence is associated with particularly low attendance odds, while traditional areas show a more favourable pattern than urban areas in the pooled model. This suggests that the geography of post-compulsory participation cannot be reduced to a simple urban-rural distinction but reflects more complex forms of locational inequality. The results show significant policy implications. Progress in attendance rates should not be interpreted as evidence that exclusion has diminished. Increased focus is necessary on retention in the post-compulsory phase, particularly for older adolescents, learners with disabilities, youth experiencing parental loss, and those residing in materially constrained households or disadvantaged localities. This highlights that school retention and differentiated academic and vocational pathways are consistent with existing scholarship on the post-school system in South Africa (Gewer, 2010; Wedekind, 2010).

Conclusions

This paper examined the determinants of school participation among South African adolescents aged 16 to 18 years between 2002 and 2022 using repeated cross-sectional General Household

Survey data. The descriptive analysis showed that attendance increased gradually from 83.1% in 2002 to 86.8% in 2022. However, the pooled multivariate logistic regression analysis showed that substantial inequalities persisted. Age was the strongest predictor of school attendance, with especially low participation among 18-year-olds. Lower attendance was also associated with female gender, disability, parental loss, larger household size, inadequate household services, and residence on farms. These findings indicate that the post-compulsory phase remains structured by layered forms of social and material disadvantage. The study, therefore, points to the need for policy responses that prioritise retention, equity, and sustained institutional support during late adolescence. It also underscores the importance of strengthening educational and vocational pathways that reflect the diverse realities of young people as they navigate schooling, work, and adulthood. In South Africa, improvements in participation have not removed entrenched exclusion from post-compulsory education.

Suggestions for Further Studies

1. It is recommended to utilize longitudinal data to track educational trajectories through the post-compulsory years and examine transitions into dropout, completion, or alternative pathways.
2. It is a good idea to use qualitative or mixed methods approaches to understand how household dynamics, disability, and geography shape young people's continued participation in schooling in the post-compulsory phase.

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