

## Primary and Secondary Education in Morocco: From Access to School into Generalization to Dropout

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### Article Info

#### Article history:

Received January 08<sup>th</sup>, 2017

Revised February 05<sup>th</sup>, 2017

Accepted February 08<sup>th</sup>, 2017

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#### Keyword:

Primary education

School dropout

School generalization

School repetition

Secondary education

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### ABSTRACT

This article provides an overview of school wastage, namely repetition and dropout in primary and secondary schools in Morocco. It describes how this phenomenon has progressed since school was implemented in the 1960s. It shows that the fundamental principles of the education system established in the aftermath of Morocco's independence in 1956 did not succeed in providing a clear, stable education program. The article concludes that despite the tremendous efforts made in enrollment, school wastage persists, and the educational system is still trapped in the idealistic principles of the 1960s, causing education to flounder in the dramatic triangle of schooling, generalization, and dropout.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Despite the remarkable progress made in terms of access to education in Morocco since independence in 1956, school wastage, namely dropout and repetition, in primary and secondary schools persists. The latest Strategic Vision of the 2015-2030 Reform recognizes that "compulsory education in its two cycles suffers from early dropouts and a significant school wastage rate, which impairs and undermines it" [1]. School dropouts (60%) are mainly children who have been to school. Girls, at 56.9% of the wastage, are more likely to be out of school and 73% of dropouts and out-of-school children are over 12 years' old. 75.9% of out-of-school students and dropouts live in rural areas. Generally, school wastage occurs during the transition stage of children from primary to secondary school [2].

School wastage adversely affects children's development and socialization [3]. It harms society altogether, "given that any dropout that occurs before the fourth grade of primary school leads purely and simply to illiteracy" [4]. In terms of cost, school wastage "constitutes a significant waste amounting to 10% of the total operational budget of National Education" [5], and therefore represents "a typical example of social divestment" [4]. To save young people from falling back into illiteracy and social exclusion, the Moroccan government reduces the deficit caused by school wastage, by funding the "Non-Formal Education Project", particularly "The School of Second Chance" whose budget increases every year to meet growing demand. The number of beneficiaries soared from 64,465 in 2015-2016 to 90,000 in 2016-2017 [6].

The purpose of this article is to give an overview of the school wastage phenomenon in Morocco, particularly repetition and dropout at the primary and secondary school levels. First, it provides a brief historical overview of the modern school system adopted by the French protectorate in Morocco (1912-1956). Second, it presents the main projects related to school access and generalization since Morocco's independence in 1956. Finally, the article shows that the efforts in education made by the

government since the 1960s have not improved school retention. The school wastage phenomenon persists today for reasons that are quite similar to those causing school wastage in the aftermath of independence sixty years ago.

## 2. HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF SCHOOLING IN MOROCCO

Although the importance of schooling acquired a fully modern dimension in the late twentieth century in Morocco, its role was deeply rooted in Moroccan traditional culture before the arrival of the French Protectorate (1912-1956). The country already had a network of typical primary and secondary education schools known as “*Koranic and Medersa*” schools. The “*Msid*”, which is the equivalent of today’s preschool, provided childcare from the age of 5 years on [7]. Generally, these traditional structures were based on an original Arabo-Islamic education system “subordinate to the religion that founds it, legitimizes it and dictates its content” [8].

Obviously, the pre-existing education system corresponded neither to the taste nor the vision of the French colonizer that had fully become involved in Moroccan education soon after signing the Protectorate Treaty between France and Morocco on the 30<sup>th</sup> of March, 1912. In 1914, French colonizer implemented profound modern education changes to serve their immediate social, political and economic interests [9]. Thus, schooling started spreading according to the most profitable urban and rural areas. Disadvantaged children were soon engaged in vocational training. By gender, “girls were oriented to the work of embroidery and carpeting, boys were either integrated into agricultural education, or introduced to the indigenous arts and crafts or other manual professions such as masonry, carpentry or metalworking” [10].

At that time, the French colonizer did not treat the heterogeneous population living in Morocco on equal terms, and this was ostentatiously reflected in the kind of education system they instituted based on “race, social class, and creed” [11]. Four types of schools emerged out of this selective, elitist and segregated system. The French school was reserved for the French and for other foreign nationalities, the Israeli school was reserved for Jews, and the Moroccan school was reserved for Muslims, but divided into schools for the “indigenous” and schools for the “sons of lords”. Franco-Berber schools like the famous “College Berber d’Azrou” (1927) were a specific type of school that the colonizer created with the ideological purpose of eradicating the Arabic language and Islam [12].

By 1956, the colonizer segregated education policy had resulted in an apparent disparity between races with only 13% of Moroccan Muslims having access to school, while the French were at 100%, and Moroccan Jews 80% [10]. Adding to the growing social, economic and political unrest, this discriminatory education measure towards Moroccan people in their own country sparked a series of strikes and nationalist movements that contributed to accelerating the independence of Morocco, which took place on November 18<sup>th</sup>, 1955 [12].

In the aftermath of independence in 1956, the main challenge of the late King Mohammed V was to provide education to the majority of a Moroccan population hampered by ignorance and illiteracy. Education policymakers had to put an end to the colonizer’s education system, and modernize an existing traditional one that was unable to meet the requirements necessary for Morocco’s post-independence construction. In 1957, a royal commission of education reforms was constituted, and this was followed in 1959 by the National Commission of Education and Culture. Both were assigned the mission of forging “a doctrine of education widely known by its four principles: Arabization, generalization, unification, and Moroccanization” [7].

These fundamental principles, stemming from a nationalist vision, had to shape the Moroccan educational identity and to reduce the gap between the systems. Generalization, which meant providing access to schooling all over the country, was launched by adopting a mass school enrollment policy. Unification was about harmonizing schools’ curricula and schedules. “Arabization” meant instituting Arabic as the national language of education in the modern public school. “Moroccanization” referred to training Moroccan educators and administrators to replace the colonizer staff. While in the process of reforming the system, three types of schools emerged; traditional, public and private ones started operating simultaneously. Indeed, “the anarchic heterogeneity of these three types, the first being Arabic-oriented, the second being French-oriented, and the third one combining the two, was the cause of all the ‘ills’ of our education system at the time and today” [13].

To implement the new fundamental principles of education, it was first necessary to reform the discriminatory education system inherited from the Protectorate to make it accessible to all Moroccans and compatible with the new nationalist vision. Moroccans aspired to build a national school that would meet the requirements of modernization and revalue the cultural heritage, as well as forging an authentic identity [9]. However, torn between traditional and modern education, the post-independence education system would

remain for a long time marked by an identity crisis and a search for structure and institutionalization [9], [14], [15]-[16].

Although the nationalist movement aspired to a radical change in education policy, the four fundamental principles remained, according to Baina (1983), “an abstract doctrine” of the vision of its authors, and one that did not stem from democratic institutions solely authorized to build and present a true educational project [17]. This policy had neither a clear vision of the type of the new citizen the country needed nor an “exact representation of the contours of the education system to be instituted. We remained for a long time attached to the four principles- generalization, unification, Arabization, and Moroccanization-, around which there was a semblance of consensus” [9]. Moreover, the dream of cutting ties with the colonizer system could not be realized due to a severe shortage of qualified Moroccan human resources in the fields of administration and education, which made the desire for change difficult to achieve [14].

### 3. SCHOOL GENERALIZATION

The school generalization project began to materialize in 1963 during the reign of the late King Hassan II. School became “compulsory for Moroccan children of both gender from the year they reach the age of seven to thirteen years old” [18]. However, this obligation was not enforced throughout the country and was not followed by a rigorous application of the other fundamental principles of the new Moroccan national school. It was difficult for the three different education systems to unify content and planning. “Arabization” immediately faced severe shortage of trained teachers and Arabic curricula. School management became chaotic due to a lack of trained directors. The government could not provide education to all girls and boys throughout the country, whether in urban or rural areas. These shortcomings reinforced geographic and gender inequalities, and plunged the education system into both quantitative and qualitative deficits at the public school level in favor of the proliferation of a private education system widely encouraged by the Moroccan government [11].

As it was difficult to meet the rising need for schooling, “the first ‘plan quinquennal’ (1960-1964) proposed to create, along with formal education, an ‘absorption’ sector, less formal, in order to provide basic education to hundreds of thousands of children who did not have access to school” [19]. ‘Koranic preschools’ historically known for teaching children to learn the Koran (Muslims’ holy book) by heart before school age were given the task of teaching numeracy and the Arabic language. The religious teachers who had to teach in these pseudo-modern preschools were not trained in any other pedagogical methods than memorization applied in learning the Koran [7].

In the early seventies, “primary and secondary schools, both in the cities and rural areas, started to become deserted due to the cumulative effect of repetitions and dropouts, in contrast to progressive and continuous training centers that led to the attainment of a diploma” [20]. The efforts made by the Moroccan government in promoting school access (1.365 million students in 1975, 1.985 million students in 1980, 2.55 million students in 1985) continued to be affected by student dropout rates and stagnation, especially in rural areas. Due to deteriorating teaching conditions, school repetition rates (30.8% in 1975, 31.3% in 1980, 32.3% in 1983) increased and “reached a level that exceeds the number of new enrollments, thus making the primary school a cycle which welcomes students to park them instead of helping them progress in their learning” [9].

To enhance school progress, Morocco has aligned with the international community in promoting the fundamental right of children to education as stated in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1984, art. 26), as well as the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of the Child (1957). The National Charter of Education and Training [21] considered the most important education reform launched since Moroccan independence, placed “learners in general and children in particular, at the core of the reflective and pedagogical action. From this perspective, it has to offer to the children of Morocco the conditions that are necessary for their development and accomplishment” [21]. One of the fundamental objectives of this reform is to provide a “generalized, quality education to all children and young people of Morocco, in preschool, from age 4 to 6, and in primary and secondary school, from 6 to 15” [21].

In 2009, the Moroccan government launched an education Emergency Plan to “make compulsory schooling effective until the age of 15” [22]. The Emergency Plan planned to achieve in 2012-2013, “in every municipality, 95% minimum enrollment of children aged 6 to 11” and to achieve in 2014-2015 “90% primary completion rate without repetition in the 2009-2010 cohort” [23]. In terms of universal education achievement, Morocco is far ahead of countries such as Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Pakistan, Burkina Faso, etc., and it is aligned with countries such as Algeria, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates, Australia, Hungary, etc.

#### 4. SCHOOL WASTAGE AT PRIMARY AND SECONDARY SCHOOL LEVELS

In 2012-2013, Morocco reached a schooling generalization rate of “63.5% in the 4-5 age group, as against 99.6% for 6-11 year-olds, 85% for 12-14 year-olds and only 58.5% in the 15-17 age group” [24]. In collaboration with national and international NGOs, today Morocco has made major progress throughout the kingdom with a schooling generalization rate exceeding 97%, according to UNESCO’s 2015 report [25]. However, school generalization does not guarantee equality of opportunity. Disparities between gender and territory continue to hinder educational development, as evidenced by the fact that “12.8% of young people nationally have no education level, especially in rural areas, where 15% of boys and 30.7% of girls aged 15-24 have never integrated into any school system at all” [24].

The figures mentioned above correlate significantly with the low graduation rates, resulting in 36.3% of young people having no qualifications, of whom 42% are girls. 55% have an average level corresponding to secondary school or vocational majors, and only 8.2% of young people possess a qualifying secondary or higher education diploma [24]. Disparities between rural and urban girls persisted throughout the education reform with “58.2% of women and girls aged 10 and over having no education at all in 2011, compared to only 29.8% in urban areas” [24]. This disparity widens at higher education levels to reach 0.6% in the countryside, compared to 8.7% in the cities.

During over a decade of education reform (1999-2012) the Ministry’s investment budget rose from 2 billion dirhams between 2001 and 2004 to 3.1 billion dirhams between 2005 and 2012, representing an average improvement of 6.7%. During 2008-2012, the budget reached 3.9 billion dirhams [24]. The education projects carried out within the Emergency Plan, coupled with the government’s huge investments in infrastructure have improved enrollment rates quantitatively. However, the reform failed to improve education qualitatively and schools could not meet the challenge of retaining students through completion of their primary and secondary education [7]-[8]. In 2012-2013, the school completion rate reached 41.9% at the qualifying secondary level, and the repetition rate 16.7% at the secondary level [24].

Indeed, completion rate in primary education decreased from 90.2% in 2012-13 to 87.8% in 2013-14, and kept fluctuating from “48.1% to 70.6%, to 65.6% in both primary and secondary cycles and from 23.6% to 41.9% to 34.6% in the 3 cycles: primary, secondary and qualifying secondary” [26]. Despite the national strategies developed to promote school retention [21]-[22]-[27]; 100,000 students under 15 years old drop out of school each year [23]. In 2012-2013, the average dropout rate of students in secondary school reached 9.3% as against 8.7% at the qualifying secondary. In 2014, the primary school level recorded a dropout rate of 2.5%, and 10.6% at the secondary level, and 11.9% at the qualifying secondary level [26].

Similarly, students’ achievements are highly affected by the repetition phenomenon. It is as severe as the dropout phenomenon and one of the most important causes of school delay for young people. Indeed, “it is the repetition and dropout rates which remain the most easily quantifiable symptoms of school wastage” [9]. In their school careers, a third of pupils in primary school and more than half the students in secondary school register a minimum of a year’s delay. Studies have shown that “among 100 pupils previously enrolled in the first year of primary school, only 88 reach the sixth year, 66 reach the 3rd year in secondary school and 35 reach the 2nd Baccalaureate year” [26]. In 2013-2014, the primary school level reported a repetition rate of 11%; the figures were 16.6% in the secondary level and 17.9% in the qualifying secondary. In 2013, “over two-thirds of the students (68.8%) are behind at the Baccalaureate final year” [27].

Early school wastage represents a considerable loss in public finances and weighs down “the Moroccan State’s expenditure, both in personnel and equipment” [28]. In 2002-2003, expenditure amounted to MAD 512.4 million, without including the additional cost of school repetition the State takes in hand before the final dropout of the student [29]. In 2003-2004 “the total cost of school dropouts (elementary, secondary and qualifying secondary) amounted to MAD 2.3 billion, representing 8.9% of the current operating budget of the National Board of Education in the same year” [4]. This amounts to an additional cost of MAD 4800 per student in primary school, MAD 4595 per student in secondary school, and MAD 6058 per student in qualifying secondary school, as registered from 2001 to 2011, for example [27].

The preschool level has not improved during the implementation of the education reforms, given that only 700,000 children aged 4 to 6 benefited from this new system in 2010-2011 [30]. The fact is that preschool was neither accessible to all children nor compulsory, and its generalization over the country was neither realized in 2004 as recommended by the Charter, nor in 2015 as planned by the Emergency Plan. Conversely, it was found that “36.5% of 4 and 5-year olds are without any form of schooling, and 68% of girls have never had access to any pre-school system” [24].

Moreover, the preschool system slightly developed in urban areas was “marked by a general fragmentation” due to a lack of coordination between multiple stakeholders in the sector. It opened options for contrasting teaching methods ranging from traditional learning provided in Koranic preschools (Msid and Kouttab) to modern methods adopted in cities, such as “kindergartens”. This contrast is reflected in the

means of socialization and the language of education used [30]. Koranic schools favor the Arabic language, and learning is memorization-based and product-oriented. They are a major force against illiteracy, and often the only choice for low-income families and those in rural areas and poor town districts, as well as other outskirts.

Kindergartens are developing steadily in few schools in towns and have not been generalized yet in the public sector. According to the recommendation of the Charter and the Emergency Plan, kindergartens use both Arabic and French and learning is much more process-oriented. However, preschool (from nursery to kindergarten) has been one of the most profitable education segments for the private education sector for decades. It is the only resort for middle- and high-income families who do not adhere to koranic preschools. Needless to say, upper-class families tend to subscribe neither to Moroccan public nor private schools, but choose international schools (American, French, Spanish, Italian, etc). Thus, the mission of preschool in preparing all children equally to facilitate learning in primary school has given way to a preschool based on the students' place of residence and the family's "breed" and income, creating a gap between children and serving as the first foundation for school inequality, and social injustice both in their minds and in society.

Despite the efforts made during the education reform decade at different levels, school wastage persists. According to the Higher Council of Education, in 2005-2006, student repetition rates reached "13% of pupils in primary school, 16% of students in secondary school and 18% of all qualifying secondary students, representing respectively 492,000 primary school pupils, 160,000 secondary school students and 110,000 high school students" [31]. In addition to the significant extra budget spent on school repetition in primary schools, repeaters slow down the reform endeavor and lower the rates of new enrollments. This is because "the seats occupied by repeaters in the primary school would have been enough to accommodate the other 40% of preschool children that are still out of school, and would allow generalizing this type of education according to the recommendations of the Charter" [29]. Not only does this situation remain one of the main reasons for preventing larger school access, but also one of the major factors in increasing illiteracy rates among the population [31].

Students' access to school does not guarantee school completion as long as the education system fails to retain them. A study carried out in 2012 among children aged 6 to 18 in four academies shows that the rate of out-of-schooling for all of these academies is "1.9 % (0.8% in urban areas to 3.4% in rural areas", with a dropout rate of 7% in urban areas, and 10.3 to 19.4% in rural areas. These results confirm that nearly all the children had access to school initially and that the dropout rate later reached 12.3%, "which means that nearly one in eight children drop out of school" [32]. Similarly, the Non-Formal Education management confirms that nearly 1.15 million children across the country are either out-of-school or have dropped out of school. They are aged 8 to 18, and composed of "62% girls, 95% 12 year-olds and up, 75% in rural areas, and 60% are dropouts" [33]. In 2015, about 64,465 children and teenagers required reintegration programs. Their number has soared to 90,000 in 2016-2017 [6], making hard for the State to meet this increasing social demand [27].

## 5. STUDENT REINTEGRATION INITIATIVES

In order to protect young people from falling back into illiteracy, the Charter recommended for those that "are out of school or have dropped out of school, aged 8 to 16, a full national informal education program" [21]. 12-year-old children study in order to reintegrate into the school system, and teenagers aged 12 to 16 are oriented towards vocational training. 15 to 20-year olds are encouraged to get involved in a productive activity [33]. The Charter makes it clear that "this operation must aim to help young people acquire the necessary knowledge and to give them a second chance to integrate or reintegrate into the education training cycles, by setting up gateways that allow them access to these cycles" and by providing intensive programs as well as pedagogical timetables tailored to their needs [21].

During the last decade, the Ministry of National Education, in partnership with civil society stakeholders, NGOs and international organizations such as USAID, UNICEF, and the European Union, implemented a series of innovative Non-Formal Education programs to enhance school retention and reintegration [33]. Preventive programs include educational monitoring and social mobilization activities (community engagement and educational support). Curative programs like "Re-schooling" provide the "School of Second Chances" (E2C) and "Istidrak", professional integration training, along with other social projects such as "Child-to-Child", "Caravan", and "youth speak", [33], all of which have enhanced student retention. In particular, "Tayssir", a special support program that provides financial aid to needy families in rural areas, has had a positive impact on student enrollment and retention. 88,000 pupils benefited from this program in 2008-2009 and 730,000 in 2011-2012, a growth rate of 730%. This mechanism allowed enrollment to increase by 6.5% and dropouts to reduce by 1.5% during the same period [34].

Along with the aforementioned projects, “monitoring cells” were set up in primary and secondary schools in collaboration with a variety of civil society stakeholders. “District inspectors, orientation counselors, members of the school cooperative, members of ‘L’ Association Marocaine des Parents et Tuteurs d’Elèves’, neighborhood associations, and elected municipality representatives” [24] were mobilized along with academics and administrative staff in this joint school retention program. However, it turned out that only 6% of primary school teachers and 8% of secondary school teachers oriented pupils and students to the monitoring cells in case of need, whereas 76% of primary school teachers and 54% of secondary school teachers never did. According to the latter, this project has not been successful because monitoring cells are not operational and teachers are neither trained to provide individualized counselling to students, nor informed of the existence of such monitoring cells at all [24].

## 6. INADEQUATE EDUCATIONAL PROGRAM AND RELATED ISSUES

Despite tremendous progress made by the government in improving school facilities and infrastructure throughout the country (e.g., electricity, girls’ boarding schools, sanitation, transportation, etc), students’ learning ability has failed to follow. One of the major reasons of school dropout stems from the education system’s inability to offer an adequate program. Moroccan pupils do not meet national and international standards in basic literacy and numeracy skills [31]. Like sub-Saharan Africa, India and Pakistan, 50% of the children in primary schools can neither read nor write, which negatively affects their learning experience later in secondary school. Although school manuals and pedagogical approaches have undergone an important reform to meet modern education requirements, student illiteracy has increased in the last decade, and today 76% of children are unable to read or write after four years in primary school [35].

According to the results of the Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) organized by the International Association for Evaluation and Educational Achievement (IEA) in 2003, 74% of Moroccan schoolchildren were below the minimum level required by PIRLS in math and science. With a score of 347 in mathematics and a score of 304 in science, they were far behind the international average scores of 495 in mathematics and 489 in science [31]. In 2011, Morocco was ranked near the bottom of the list (just above last-placed Yemen) with a score of 355 in mathematics and a score of 264 in science, and literally last in reading with a score of 310. It remains far behind other countries of the MENA region such as Qatar (413/394), Bahrain (436/449), the United Arab Emirates (434/428) and Tunisia (359/346) [36].

The language of teaching in primary and secondary education has been hostage to political ideologies. After an attempt of nearly thirty years of “Arabization”, this principle has proven a failure, causing a lot of harm to schoolchildren and later to students who reach higher education. The latter have to carry out studies in the French language, the official language of teaching in higher education, and the one they completely ignore. After sixty years of independence, Morocco has not succeeded in having a clear-cut linguistic policy so far. In all these years, language has been subject to political, economic and social debates. Although French has finally been resumed this year in primary and secondary schools as the language of instruction in mathematics, and in the natural and physical sciences; the system retains, however, exactly the same challenges Moroccan education faced in the aftermath of independence, i.e. a shortage of qualified teachers, a lack of adapted curricula, and an absence of a unified program, etc.

In addition to educational shortcomings, issues of security, equality and gender rights hamper the progress of the Moroccan education system. According to the Higher Council for Education, Morocco is ranked among the worst countries in terms of school security, with 73% of schoolchildren feeling unsafe in their own school [31]. Furthermore, the National Council for Human Rights (CNDH) reports severe inequalities in terms of access to secondary school, affecting rural girls, children living in urban peripheral areas, and children with special needs. While gender equality has improved in urban areas (91%), it has reached only 55% in rural areas [30], where “58.2% of girls and women aged 10 and over have no education level in 2011, against only 29.8% in urban areas” [3]. Moreover, “if 12.8% of young people have no education on a national level, this is particularly true in rural areas where 15% of boys and 30.7% of girls aged 15-24 have never integrated into any school system” [24].

The latest survey on “intergenerational social mobility”, carried out by the “Haut Commissariat au Plan (HCP)” in 2011, found that the education system is a considerable factor in widening social disparities. The results show that social advancement concerns 51% of the urban population compared to 14.1% of the rural population, with men at 43.7% and women at 17.9%. “This social advancement, promoted by the education level and the type of degree, varies from 26.5% among non-graduates to 84.3% among graduates from ‘grandes écoles’ (Higher schools that have limited admission access and are highly selective)” [37]. These results confirm that the Moroccan school remains, largely, a breeding ground of social inequality and seriously contributes to the renewal of the elites” [30].

## 7. CONCLUSION

In short, the education reforms carried out in Morocco since independence in 1956 have not succeeded in improving the rate of student retention in school. Although non-formal education should be considered a good opportunity for dropouts and out-of-school children, it is an indicator of the failure of the education system and the country's societal mission. Students who do not persist in school, and do not have the opportunity to catch up through non-formal education, will inevitably fall back into illiteracy, and most likely into juvenile delinquency, child employment, child abuse, poverty and other related social threats.

Finally, we can say quite legitimately that it is high time for our education system to get over the idealistic principles of the 1960s in which it has been trapped for decades, causing education to flounder in the dramatic triangle of schooling, generalization, and dropout. If thousands of children were denied access to school in the aftermath of independence sixty years ago, today thousands have access to school but without any achievement to show for it. Formerly, hope was placed in "the school of resorption", and today in "Non-Formal Education"; only the appellations have changed. Without reconsidering our education system in congruence with a clear societal mission, as a fundamental element towards progress that goes beyond teaching and learning, our school wastage will never cease.

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