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# INTRODUCTION

## Who Gets In and Why?

*What the schools of the Southern Suburbs have perfected is how to talk about race in admissions without having to bring it up.*

Among those who study human cultures it is often remarked that one of the tasks of the scholar is 'to make the familiar strange'.[1] What is familiar in South African society is that every day 13 million children, spread out over 26 000 schools in nine provinces, are taught by more than 430 000 teachers in the expectation of learning. What is further familiar is that the majority of those children end up in all-black schools, and that only a small proportion of black students attend schools that are racially integrated to a greater or lesser degree. In addition, it is strikingly familiar how many of those integrated schools have majority-white populations.

The research for this book takes this familiar observation of white-dominant schools in a black-majority country and makes it intellectually, culturally and politically strange. How is it possible to have white-dominant schools in the shadow of apartheid? How can white domination pass as an undisturbed familiarity on the educational landscape when the Constitution and any number of education laws and policies commit school and society to equity, equality and redress? Why has there been no revolt against majority-white schools in this 'protest nation' (Duncan 2016)? What are the conditions that sustain such levels of segregation in, especially, the elite former white schools of South Africa more than 25 years after the legal death of apartheid?

There was only one way to investigate this *strangeness*, and that was to get inside a cross-section of former white schools in one of the wealthiest suburban corridors on the continent—the Southern Suburbs of Cape Town. We decided on 30 schools, stretching from the City Bowl in the north of Cape Town all the way down to Fish Hoek on the False Bay coast in the south. We chose only primary schools, because it became clear early on in this study

1 For an account of the possible origins of the full phrase, 'to make the strange familiar and the familiar strange', see Karabel (2005).

that patterns of racial segregation and the persistence of white-dominant schools are already established in the early grades and, even earlier, in the preschool years.

The 30 primary schools have one thing in common—they were all-white schools under apartheid. They are quite different from each other in every other sense. Some are private schools, although most are public schools. There are large schools with interconnected preschools, primary schools and high schools by the same or similar names, and there are smaller, stand-alone primary schools. Some of the primary schools once had only junior grades that continued into more senior primary grades at nearby schools. Most are, or have become, English-medium schools, but a few are traditional Afrikaans schools. Some of the schools, public and private, are very wealthy institutions; others barely manage to survive on their school fees, though most are well-funded schools with impressive facilities.

It is important in the context of this study to briefly distinguish between public and private schools in South Africa. Public schools are state-controlled and dependent on the state for funding. Private schools are independent and raise their funds almost entirely from school fees. In the case of public schools, parents can apply to the government's Department of Basic Education (DBE) for exemption from school fees, and no child may be denied access to learning because of a failure to pay the set school fees. Parents whose children attend private schools have no exemption option. That said, the distinction between public and private schools is becoming progressively blurred. The top-tier public schools increasingly fund most of their staffing and operational costs from tuition fees paid by parents; in many cases, only the school grounds belong to the state. And there are cases in which the provincial department of education contributes to the school fees of children in less affluent independent schools. It is also not unusual to find that in better-resourced public schools there are teachers paid by the department and so-called 'governing body teachers' paid from the school fees collected.

For purposes of this study, however, the three kinds of schools found today among former white institutions could be classified as follows:

1. *Elite schools* are schools with virtually all-white student enrolments and high to very high fees.
2. *Stable middle-class schools* are mostly schools with white-dominant student enrolments, though with greater diversity than the elite schools and moderate to high school fees.

3. *Fragile middle-class schools* are schools with modest school fees that over time have become resegregated into all-black or certainly majority-black schools.

All of the sampled schools in this book are historically white, and where reference is made to 'former white schools' this merely reflects a change of legal status—that is, the schools are no longer designated by law as exclusively for whites. It does not mean that in composition, curriculum or culture the school is no longer a white school. It follows, therefore, that a school could enrol more and more black students and still be a 'white' school because, for example, the teaching staff and the school traditions still reflect the past. Within the narrower focus of this study—that is, admissions policy—the term 'white-dominant schools' mainly refers to student enrolments.

The undertaking of this study depended, crucially, on being 'invited in' by the leaders of the 30 primary schools. Securing such invitations was always going to be a difficult task, given the highly sensitive topic, namely how greatly sought-after schools make decisions about 'who gets in' and, by extension, who is excluded. However, despite such sensitivities, most of the principals immediately accepted the research team into their schools for purposes of this enquiry. Others hesitated, leaving the team waiting for weeks, even months, before granting the researchers access. Eventually, every one of the 30 schools came on board and allowed visits to the school and interviews with the admissions team.

The research team takes the matter of trust in the relationship with each school very seriously. The information presented is derived strictly from extensive data collection at the school site, principally through interviews, but also from documentation made available to the team. There were considerable discrepancies at some schools between the self-reported statistics on race and enrolments and the objective records obtained from the official database of the Western Cape Education Department, the Centralised Education Management Information System (CEMIS).

In this spirit of trust, all schools are presented here anonymously through the use of pseudonyms. The intention is decidedly not to embarrass any school, but merely to represent what is known about admissions policy and practice at each institution. Pseudonyms notwithstanding, the research team recognises that it may be difficult to obscure the identity of a school in small and closely acquainted areas such as the Southern Suburbs.

Observations are reported factually, often in the words of the respondents. In some cases, respondents asked to review the transcripts and requested changes to what they had said; these changes were made accordingly.

The title of the book itself is borrowed from an article by Rachel Rubin (2014) titled 'Who Gets In and Why? An Examination of Admissions to America's Most Selective Colleges and Universities'. While the focus of Rubin's American study is on higher education, it carries a similar aim to this South African study on schools—to unravel 'the mysteries of the admissions process' (Rubin 2014:1) at elite institutions.

It was also decided to represent in this book an example of a school's racial integration flowing from its admissions policy. For this reason, Pinelands North Primary (or 'Red School') features as a commendable case of what can happen when schools transform in ways that build their diversity by including students of different 'racial groups', abilities, genders and culture. Unfortunately, such schools are rare in this study.

In all cases, schools participated with enthusiasm in the interview processes. Where individual interviews with principals and admissions officers, as well as engagements with teachers, were offered, rich data sets on the schools' admissions processes could be collected. Some schools allowed multiple visits, and this, too, strengthened the research inputs into the study. Retired staff, including teachers, offered valuable additional information on some of the schools.

The site visits revealed some interesting quirks and enduring portraits of the schools. It was, for example, a pleasant surprise to find a cemetery for teachers on the grounds of a Roman Catholic school, a place where its Dominican sisters are laid to rest. When a nun dies, there is a service in the chapel and the girls carry the coffin past a students' guard of honour en route to the teacher's final resting place. It was moving to see how smaller Afrikaans schools struggled with maintaining their language identity in suburbs dominated by English. It was exciting to be invited into classrooms and to speak to the children—something the team was able to do in more than one school; these walks across the campus terrain provided what the team called a subjective 'eye test' on the culture and the demographics of a school.

Some of the stories encountered were half-funny, like the one about the pregnant Catholic mother who desperately wanted to get her unborn child onto the admissions application list of a girls' school. As soon as ultrasound could show that the foetus was a girl, the mother rushed the scans to the

school's admission office for early consideration! We heard various versions of this story, including parents sending their child's birth certificate to a school at the very moment it becomes available from Home Affairs.

During the site visits, we found that all of the schools were grappling in their own ways with the modalities of change. Every school recognised the dilemmas of not transforming their student numbers or their teacher appointments quickly enough. Yet the governors, principals, teachers and parents are historical actors within the everlasting drama of South African education (Soudien 2019). They are shaped by their own experiences of the past, their own preferences in the present, and their own fears for the future. The purpose of this study is therefore not to blame individuals, but to show how schools as institutions come to be the way they are as a result of the decisions of these in-school actors, on the one hand, and the agreements of out-of-school actors—the policy-makers and politicians—on the other.

In the process of engaging with the schools on admissions policy, several of them asked the research team leader to assist the school with their transformation efforts. This typically involved addressing the parents and/or teachers of the school. In this sense, the research visits offered an opportunity for school-wide discussions on transformation that included parents and teachers; these offers were all accepted and led to vigorous engagements with the school community on many of the issues covered in this book.

This study revealed many other actors to be influential in how schools decide on who gets in or who gets left out. The hitherto unstudied role of estate agents in South Africa, as interlocutors between the school and new parents coming into a suburb, is revealed in this book, but much more in-depth study of this phenomenon is required. The function of education department officials also needs to be better understood, at the level of both provincial policy-makers and the immediate representatives of the government in schools, the district directors. There are all kinds of close-up dealings that unfold between the school and these outside authorities that also affect admissions options and decisions in several schools. The decision on who to admit is certainly not one that resides exclusively in the principal's office.

In this respect, a novel insight that was gained concerned the critical role of the admissions officer. In several schools, this is the senior secretary—always a woman. This one person sees all the applications before they are narrowed down. An enquirer's phone call via the secretary's office can end or encourage an application long before documents are formally tabled for

consideration. The secretary is the one who first suspects false or doctored documents in the applications set. It is the secretary who verifies information provided and who alerts the principal to potential candidates. Thus, more than the principal, the secretary has enormous influence over whose documents make it to the final stages of deliberation as to who gets into a particular school. Often the secretary outstays a particular principal's tenure at the school and becomes the keeper of institutional memory on admissions. What eventually comes to the table for decision-making therefore depends also on the admissions secretary. Not surprisingly, where the secretary was involved in the site interviews, the quality of the data for this study was improved.

One of the most disconcerting issues that came up in all of the school visits was the continuing salience of race in admissions. The complex spider's web of school policies is, unfortunately, little more than a scheme through which to regulate admissions in favour of the children of white, middle-class families. The admission of small numbers of children of the black elite means that a white school can claim to be non-discriminatory in decisions about who gains access to the institution.

For elite black parents, on the other hand, the goal is to ensure the sustainability of white, privileged schools. Here racism and classism intersect *powerfully* to shape the identity of the post-apartheid school. The association of race with quality education, or the lack thereof, explains the taste of the black middle classes for former white elite schools and for white teachers in them. Behind the threads of the spider's web, therefore, race is still the single most important consideration in the admissions policies of the elite and stable middle-class schools. However, race also remains an unpleasant subject to talk about. What the schools of the Southern Suburbs have perfected is how to talk about race in admissions without having to bring it up.

## No two webs are the same, even from the same spider

Each school is unique in the way it manages its admissions policies. Some only require high fees in order to exclude. Others require fees and residency to manage admissions. One school practises selection by creed. Most schools have dropped heritage (parents or grandparents who attended the school) as an advantage, but all except a few schools still offer places for those who have siblings at the school. Such various policy instruments change over time, even for the same school. Where once all of these former white schools marched

to the dictates of apartheid policy and excluded black students, almost all of them opened their doors when given the opportunity to do so at the end of the apartheid era. School policies, like spider's webs, are remarkably flexible under pressure from the elements, but also resilient when faced by the winds of change.

It was this resilience that drew us to these schools. Why do the former white schools, while adjusting to the pressure for change, nevertheless look more or less as they did under apartheid, and how does this come about? We were less interested in attributing cause—saying that a school is racist is unhelpful as explanation in a country where the political and policy levers are in the hands of a black-majority government—than in finding out what it was that kept this system of white-dominant schools in place.

This required that we resort to theory, which means explanations larger than the cases themselves. In this regard, we found powerful resonances in what is called interest convergence theory, only with a twist. As explained in the final chapter, the racial interests of white people and the class interests of the black elites coincide to maintain the status quo in the former white schools.

## Spider's webs can be destroyed and rebuilt

Not all of the former white schools have remained as such. Those more likely to have changed radically are the poorer former white schools with accessible school fees and within reach of public transport routes. These schools have changed from all-white to all-black schools, which, in most cases, means coloured-majority schools.

For poorer former white schools such as these, the challenge is to survive, and so the doors are thrown open without restrictions, since declining numbers would mean the loss of teachers. The school rebuilds with a new admissions policy that has minimal requirements. This resegregation of former white schools is the subject of one of the chapters in this book.

## Spider silk cannot be seen unless light is reflected off it

This book is not only a scholarly account of a complex policy problem in education; it is also an attempt to shed light on what is often obscure to black and poor parents—why their children fail to gain access to some of the most prestigious academic schools in the country. The complex webs of influence that govern admissions are mostly invisible to the majority of the parent population; chief among these is knowledge of the school—not knowing

about admissions deadlines; or background checks for what we call 'social selection'; or unadvertised routines, such as queuing overnight for a number that could guarantee admission.

Unfortunately, while the research in this volume sheds light on exclusionary processes in admissions, it cannot guarantee that even the possession of such knowledge would promote access to these prestige schools. What this work does confirm, however, is that the odds are massively stacked against those who live outside the schools' feeder zones and who do not have the financial resources to pay high school fees. Put differently, this research illuminates a social injustice that continues in the admissions cycle of every former white South African school, something that is unlikely to be resolved by the schools themselves.

## The pain and frustration of the newcomers

One of the troubling observations made in the course of this research was of the experiences of newly appointed black principals coming into former white schools. Under pressure for transformation, all three school types (elite, stable and fragile middle-class schools) started to appoint non-white principals. All of them experienced the all-too-familiar racial doubts of the remaining white colleagues—will standards drop? Of course, the standards did not drop, but 'standards' was code for the expectation that a black principal and more black students automatically meant that the academic standing of a school would decline. The principals recalled these taunts with some emotion, and the academic standing of their schools, of course, did exactly the opposite of fall. These were, after all, ambitious leaders who saw taking charge of former white schools as an opportunity to demonstrate excellence through their leadership.

However, this was where the frustration set in, for no matter how hard the principals tried, white families abandoned several of the schools as change set in. Perhaps the most memorable statement from one of the black principals was: 'I can compete with resources; I cannot compete with whiteness.' In the course of this study, more black and, in particular, coloured principals were appointed at the elite schools being studied; one of them led a majority-white school that had scant evidence of any transformation. Such a case demonstrates that a black appointment at the top does not necessarily lead to the transformation of former white institutions.

Much more concentrated research is needed on the experiences and effects of black principals in former white schools. The evidence so far suggests that these education leaders struggle to be accepted on the grounds of their credentials and track record alone. Some lead majority-white schools, and others lead schools that have tipped toward black-majority enrolments. In both cases, often coloured principals also reveal their class interests by sending their own children to more elite schools than the ones in which they themselves had the opportunity to lead.

## The dark side of the web

The most disturbing feature of the former white schools is the invisibility of black African students in primary education. This is particularly the case in the elite and stable middle-class schools. In part, this reflects the demography of broader Cape Town, where coloured people remain the majority, for now; however, this dismal situation also captures the class status of most black African families. It is for this reason that middle-class schools can and should play a much more forceful role in extending quality education to more and more families in the poorer townships on the outskirts of the city. Cape Town continues to be regarded as alien to black Africans because of their invisibility within the larger population; however, schools can, over time, change this situation by consciously opening up education opportunities in middle-class and elite institutions.

Another related complexity is the presence of foreign nationals in the public schools studied. Often these are children of refugee families from north of the Limpopo. Their presence sometimes breeds resentment among South African parents whose children struggle to gain access to the few prized places, especially in the stable and even the fragile middle-class schools. In some cases principals reported harsh language and threats from working-class coloured parents.

Schools do not necessarily help the situation, as they regard the children of African families from elsewhere on the continent, such as those from Francophone countries, as lacking competence in English or Afrikaans. Instead of seeing immigrant children as adding to language-rich classrooms, they are seen as being deficient in the languages of teaching and learning. This kind of stigmatisation of children from elsewhere and the reality of competition for limited places in sought-after schools do not bode well for the future. Integration cannot mean only the building of social cohesion

between black and white South Africans; it must also mean recognising the value and contributions of citizens from other African nations.

## Conclusion

In the end, the only way to improve social and educational outcomes for all citizens is to rebuild quality education in schools both rural and urban, in the townships and suburbs, as well as in the city and peri-urban areas. There are simply too few former white schools, carrying as they do the inherited privileges of a colonial and apartheid past, to deliver the quality education deserved by all. Of course, that is not to say that those former white schools do not need to be more fully integrated for the sake of both white and black children.

If it is the case that education offers opportunities and advancement for individuals and families across the divides of race and class, then the transformation of all schools must become a priority of the state. In the absence of such fundamental changes to the majority of schools, the competition for places in the former white schools will continue unabated, with uncertain consequences for the future. This is why it is critical to understand how these sought-after schools make decisions about admissions, and with what effects, and what the prospects are for transformation in years to come.

## Roadmap

We start in Chapter 1 by explaining why admissions to the former white schools are such a high-stakes game for parents and their children. It is important to understand the history that explains how these schools came to be the way they are today. The key research questions are outlined, as well as the concepts and methods deployed to answer the puzzles at the heart of this study.

Chapter 2 offers the metaphor of the spider's web as a heuristic device for making sense of policy and politics in South African education. The various strands of the web—the policy instruments that make up the admissions policy of a school—are introduced. The politics of policy-making is outlined in order to give a sense of admissions as not simply a technical matter to be 'applied', but also a political asset in the hands of both the government and school governing bodies (SGBs). Explaining how policy works is an important part of this elaboration.

How do these policy instruments work in practice? That is, how do schools actually make admissions decisions? Chapter 3 launches into this explanation by focusing on the 'feeder zones' or 'catchment area' policy used by most schools. Where parents live determines whether they can access a top school. The chapter explains how this policy is used, abused or ignored by various schools, even when it appears on the website of the institution.

In Chapter 4, the school fees policy is analysed. How does it work in practice? Are parents informed of the education authorities' fee-exemption policy? How do schools manage exemption applications? And what happens if parents cannot pay? Fees, however, also tell a broader story about the class structure of society and of the schools within them. Above all, fees remain a powerful exclusionary device in admissions, but how, exactly, does this device work?

Chapter 5 examines the workings of sibling and heritage policies in admissions. The ways schools use these polices are explained, including how such devices are modified, and sometimes even discarded, in decisions about 'who gets in'. One of the key insights explored in this chapter is the reproduction of privilege in the elite and middle-class schools.

Of all the exclusionary policies of a school, social selection is the least visible to parents applying for admission. This is because schools do not reveal these qualitative judgements, where the 'weighing up' of a parent's profession, or the marital status of a couple, or even the unseen report on social behaviour from the sending school (or preschool) are factored into the decision to admit or not. Chapter 6 explains how social selection works in what started as colonial schools, where selection by class (and race) was an important part of a history of discrimination.

What happens when transformation 'goes wrong'? When white flight in the face of growing black student numbers turns a former white school black? Chapter 7 offers the first systematic account of how resegregation happens within and around former white schools. The different patterns of resegregation are carefully described in the light of a school's history (which white community was served), geography (where the school is located in a white neighbourhood) and economy (who can afford to enrol at the school).

The dismal state of race and admissions in the 30 schools is countered by the powerful example of Pinelands North Primary School, also known as 'Red School'. How does one school buck the trend among these cookie-cutter middle-class institutions by advancing a socially inclusive admissions policy

as well as the progressive appointment of black teachers? Chapter 8 sheds light on the crucial role of school leadership, along with a critical mass of open-minded parents, in the transformation of an ordinary public school.

Finally, Chapter 9 explains what it is that sustains majority-white schools in South Africa. This question requires an understanding of the negotiated settlements of the early 1990s as they impacted education, the class choices of the black elite and the admissions choices of the former white schools. By linking the micropolitics of a school to the macropolitics of society, this book offers a unique set of insights into the (de)segregation of schools anywhere in the world.

While politics and policy play important roles in shaping admissions decisions in South Africa's former white schools, there is the very human drama for parents across the country as they scramble for access to these prized institutions—as the next chapter shows.

# CHAPTER 1

## Getting In: The High-Stakes Game of Admissions to Elite Schools

*These Southern Suburbs ... are probably the most untransformable area of southern Africa.*

—Principal of an elite Cape Town girls' school

### Introduction

Ann Richards suspected that someone had fudged the electricity bill. It seemed as if the address on the electricity bill had been altered, but she could not be sure. So, Ann did what any school secretary responsible for admissions would do—she decided to check. This meant taking a walk to the stated residence nearby to determine whether in fact the smudged address was that of the family who so much wanted to get their daughter into this boutique girls' school in Cape Town's Southern Suburbs. It was raining hard, but Ann was known for her determination. So, she stood under an umbrella outside the residence to see whether this was indeed the home of the applicant. Nobody came or went, so after a while Ann decided to ring the bell and see for herself. It was a white person who opened the door, so she apologised—wrong street number. The application was from a black family. Ann called the parents and informed them that their daughter would not be admitted to the new Grade 1 class.

Like every working-class parent aspiring to find their child a place in the elite schools of the Southern Suburbs, Joyce Hendricks was desperate to escape the dysfunctional schools of Mitchells Plain where her family lived. Everybody knew that these were dead-end schools, sometimes literally so. A stray bullet could kill a child caught in the cross-fire of warring gangs. But even if you survived with your life, the quality of education was so poor in this part of the 'Plain that boys, especially, dropped out of school in high numbers, and the few who did run the gauntlet of government education either failed or passed poorly, without any chance of higher education or a decent job. But Joyce knew that if she could only get her boy into this posh Rondebosch school the family

would be set for life. A good school means a good pass, a degree from the University of Cape Town (UCT), a good job and a nice middle-class life.

The problem for Joyce was that these elite schools have tough zoning policies, which means that you have to live within the residential area closest to the school. Mitchells Plain was obviously far outside of the so-called 'catchment area' for this school. So, Joyce did something she could barely afford to do—she worked hard to raise the money and rented an apartment close to the school, paying the required two months' rent upfront. After the first water and electricity account arrived, Joyce promptly sent off her son's application to the school. She was lucky. This school allows for rental addresses; other posh schools insist that the applicant's family own the property. Shortly afterwards, Joyce sub-let the place to another resident and moved back to her Mitchells Plain home. Mission accomplished.

This is a book about 'getting in' and 'keeping out' children whose parents apply for admission to some of the most prestigious academic schools in the world. The research itself was based on a simple question about South Africa's elite schools: *Who gets in and why?* It soon became clear that the admissions processes of our sample institutions offered a much more complex and intriguing story than the published admissions policies on the schools' websites. It became clear that 'getting in', for some, invariably means 'keeping out' other children who do not satisfy the explicit, as well as the less visible, criteria for admission to the elite schools.

In fact, the *overt* criteria for admissions tell less than half the story. What desperate parents do not know is that there are a host of *covert* measures that schools deploy in making decisions about who gets in and who is kept out. The narrow focus of the book is to explain how schools actually make decisions about admissions, and what the consequences are for the race and class profiles of each school. The broad focus is on what kinds of political and policy choices sustain the status quo, in which white-dominant schools continue to thrive in South Africa after apartheid.

## The Southern Suburbs of Cape Town

Running along the extended Main Road from north to south lies one of the 'whitest' and wealthiest areas of South Africa, called the Southern Suburbs of Cape Town. It is not without cause that one of the white principals of a prestigious school in this area observed to the authors that 'these Southern Suburbs … are probably the most untransformable area of southern Africa.'

Bounded to the west by the M3 and to the east by the M5 motorways, the snaking Main Road is a place marker for more than 40 former white schools on both sides of the thoroughfare. These are the elite schools of the Southern Suburbs, and every graduate from the high schools among them sets their sights—for some, literally, by simply looking up—on Africa's globally ranked research institution, UCT, which lies on the slopes of Devil's Peak next to Table Mountain.

This elite real estate of the Southern Suburbs would, in itself, be uninteresting were it not for the fact that just outside this corridor of mainly white homes and schools lie the black areas of Cape Town that were divided by the Group Areas Act under apartheid into coloured and African townships, each with its own schools. Little has changed in the patterns of residential segregation laid down by apartheid, except for the few middle-class black families who have moved into the more expensive white suburbs of Cape Town.

To residents of Cape Town, the names of the wealthy suburbs along Main Road are instantly recognisable—Constantia, Claremont, Newlands, Rondebosch, Bishops Court, among others. And added to these are the affluent City Bowl suburbs such as Vredehoek, Tamboerskloof and Oranjezicht.

The coloured areas are also familiar, carrying names such as Athlone, Lavender Hill, Mitchells Plain, Steenberg and Factreton. Long-term residents would also know which white areas are less affluent, such as Bergvliet, Wynberg and Plumstead, and which of those same areas, with more affordable housing, have become more coloured, such as Wetton, Lansdowne and Rondebosch East. However, there is no such race and class migration in the African townships of Langa, Gugulethu, Nyanga and Khayelitsha: there the townships as well as the schools remain black African.

While the privileged schools in the former white areas of South Africa's middle-class suburbs enjoy impressive infrastructure, excellent facilities and highly qualified teachers, the black schools are mostly poorly resourced in comparison and, in the poorest areas, often dysfunctional in respect of academic performance (Spaull & Jansen 2019).

To this day, the schools of the Southern Suburbs remain among the most unequal in the country, in terms of physical infrastructure as well as academic outcomes. According to the Western Cape Government's (2018) *Municipal Economic Review and Outlook 2018*, Cape Town is not only the

most unequal part of the province; its inequality has in fact grown in recent years. Furthermore, as shown in Figure 1.1, Cape Town is also one of the most divided of the larger cities of South Africa when it comes to residential segregation (Statistics South Africa 2016).

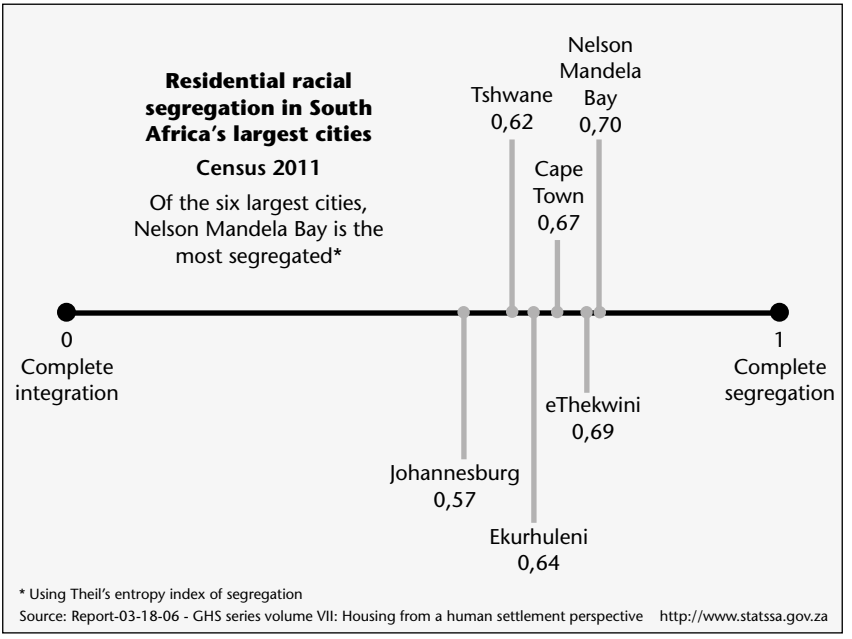


**Figure 1.1:** Racial segregation in South African cities, according to Census 2011
*Source: Statistics South Africa (2016)*

With such a close association between residential segregation and school segregation, it follows that in middle-class and wealthy areas white-dominant schools tend to reflect white-dominant neighbourhoods, just as black township schools reflect the racial demography of the surrounding areas. These settled patterns of segregation in schools and residential areas have been well documented by spatial geographers of the Cape Town suburbs over two decades (Lemon 1999; Lemon & Battersby-Lennard 2009a; McKay 2019). What these studies also show is the strong relationship between a school's resources and results, and specifically between low fees and weak academic outcomes (McKay 2019).

It makes sense, therefore, that poor black parents seek to break out of under-resourced and often dysfunctional township schools to send their children to coloured and African schools. It also follows that middle-class black, coloured and Indian parents seek the stronger academic cultures and prestige of former white schools. What is less well researched is how white parents act to preserve their hold on the limited places available inside the elite white schools, as this book will demonstrate.

The research sheds light on the competition for admission to the elite schools, how schools choose their students from among the competitors, and what the consequences are for the desegregation of these former white schools. All of this raises a preliminary question: How did South Africa's public and private schools become this way in the first place?

## The long shadow of the past

One of the distinctive features of apartheid was that it provided education along strictly racial lines, with separate and unequal schools for white, Indian, coloured and African children (Kallaway 2002). The twisted ideology of apartheid not only funded black and white education unequally, but funded Indian, coloured and African education along a downward sliding scale (see Figure 1.2), with the per capita spending on black African children being the lowest of all four 'racial groups'.

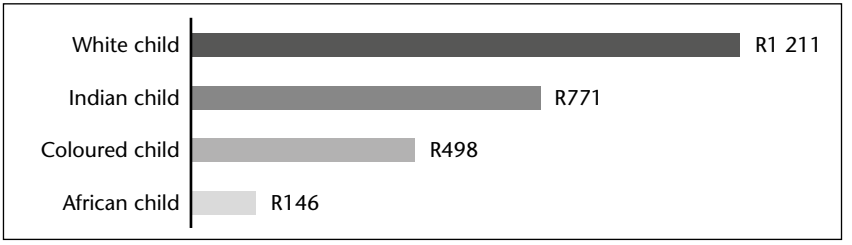


**Figure 1.2:** Educational spending, according to 'racial group', during the 1980s in South Africa
*Source: SAIRR (1984:420)*

The accumulated effects of discriminatory spending over decades are emphatically reflected in the impressive infrastructure (and other resources) of white schools compared to those of black schools, including the qualifications of teachers and the academic outcomes for students. Strikingly,

the academic outcomes for white, Indian, coloured and African students in mathematics mirrors perfectly the differential and discriminatory funding allocated over the years to each of these four groups (see Figure 1.3).

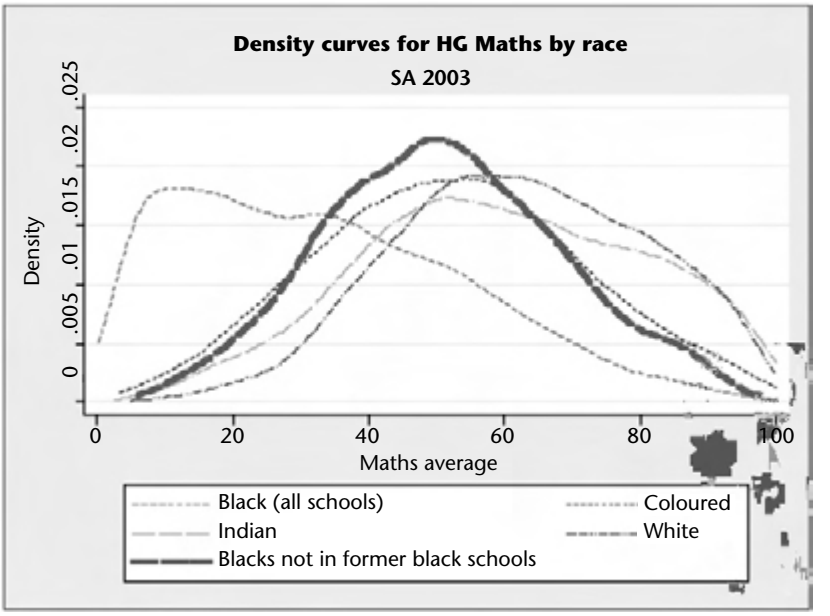


**Figure 1.3:** Distribution of mathematics achievement by race in South Africa, 2003
*Source: Van der Berg (2005:14)*

The significance of this correspondence over time between spending and academic performance, differentiated according to race, means that apartheid embedded in society a hierarchy of schools, with white schools at the top, followed by Indian and coloured schools, and African schools at the bottom of the pile. This hierarchy persists in the public mind to this day (Hunter 2016; see also Battersby 2004:286), although school place-seekers draw a lesser distinction between Indian and coloured schools. That is, poor and working-class African families seek access to the more affordable Indian and coloured schools based on the perception that they are better than township schools. Indian and coloured families, as well as middle-class African families, seek access for their children to the more expensive white schools, based, again, on the perception that they offer a better education (Chisholm & Sujee 2006).

Importantly, this hierarchy of schools represents not only differences in aggregate resources or educational outcomes, but also differences in status. For example, to have attended Westerford High School (the former white school in Newlands) is more prestigious than having attended distinguished coloured schools such as South Peninsula High School (the coloured school in Diep River). Such status differences persist even though there may be little difference in the academic outcomes (Lemon & Battersby-Lennard 2009b:531) or destinations (tertiary education, careers) of the matriculating students. The fact that Westerford's fees (R40 200 in 2019) are four times higher than South Peninsula's (R9 725 in 2019) matters only because of the association of higher fees with better-quality education.

This sense of status and prestige is not, however, confined only to white versus black schools. Within the white school community, as this research will show, there are also hierarchies of privilege that every middle-class and wealthy parent is conscious of. For example, to have attended Bishops Diocesan College is much more prestigious than to have attended Westerford, which in turn is a step up from attending Pinelands High School. Unsurprisingly, more affordable fees stay in line with declining status as one moves down the hierarchy from Bishops, whose Grade 12 fees in 2019 were R148 240, to Westerford (R40 200) to Pinelands (R32 406).

The sense of racial hierarchies between white, Indian, coloured and African schools remains etched in the public mind, and the long shadow of the past has ensured that the physical facilities and the academic performance of schools reflect the country's history of resource inequality and racial segregation. With the end of apartheid and the advent of democracy in 1994, it was widely expected that one of the first barriers to fall would be racially segregated schools (Chisholm & Sujee 2006). But how realistic were such expectations?

We know that in nations once legally divided by race, the desegregation of schools is always contentious, whether in the case of white-minority societies such as Zimbabwe (Atkinson 1982; Lemon 1995) or white-majority nations such as the USA (Baugh 2011). Even in early interracial interaction at the few common schools of South Africa's colonial period, white boarders were already 'unwilling to be associated with Natives' and, as a result, '[a]s the number of white boys declined, Black entries rose' (Hodgson & Edlmann 2018:149). Right up to the closing days of apartheid, surveys showed that white resistance to integrated schools was stronger than resistance to integrated residential areas (Bot & Schlemmer 1989). Unsurprisingly, the

end of apartheid and the opening of schools to all 'racial groups' saw not only 'apprehension and uncertainty' among whites and 'a rise in expressions of crude racism' (Penny et al 1993:416; see also Jansen 2004) but instances of outright resistance to black encroachment on white schools (Jung & Seekings 1997; Van der Linde 2001).

When apartheid was legally ended in 1994, a black-majority government under Nelson Mandela came to power with an overwhelming mandate to build a new nation by deracialising society, including the vexed matter of apartheid's segregated education system (DoE 1995). Although there had already been isolated attempts at integrating black students into white parochial schools during the apartheid years (Christie 1990), South Africa was about to enter new terrain with the anticipated desegregation of more than 27 000 public schools.

At the point of political transition from apartheid to democracy (1994), there were 27 668 schools with 11.8 million students, almost all of whom were enrolled in schools designated for their racial or ethnic group: about 1.1 million in white schools, 900 000 in coloured schools, 300 000 in Indian schools and 9.4 million in African schools (6.7 million in the rural homelands and 2.7 million in the urban areas). The numbers of students 'crossing over' into public schools not designated for their race/ethnicity were still negligible at this point, given the rigidity of the apartheid-era regulations governing admission (SAIRR 1995:242–245).

A mere seven years later (2001), the picture on racial enrolments in schools had changed significantly. In the former white schools of Gauteng, 31 per cent of students were African, 5 per cent coloured, 4 per cent Indian and 59 per cent white. In the Free State's former white schools, there were 28 per cent African students, 4 per cent coloured, 1 per cent Indian and 66 per cent white. In the Western Cape, the former white schools enrolled 3 per cent African students, 17 per cent coloured students, 23 per cent Indian students and 38 per cent white students, with the remaining students classified as 'other' (Chisholm & Sujee 2006).

By 2006, five years later, there were about 11.2 million students spread over 25 541 schools, with 31 per cent (315 000) of the students in former white schools being African, 9.3 per cent (94 659) coloured and 3.3 per cent (33 574) Indian. The percentage of African students in former coloured schools then stood at 21.8 per cent (211 232) and there were more African students than Indian students in former Indian schools (DBE nd).

In 2017, there were 12 892 273 students in 25 762 ordinary public and independent schools (DBE 2018). While it is difficult to gain access to accurate data on enrolments by race in all nine provinces, what we do know is that most schools are still black by origin, given the total number of black African students in the system; that most of the former white schools have experienced some degree of racial integration (from little to no integration to complete resegregation from all-white to all-black schools); that Coloured and Indian students migrate largely into former white schools; that the extent of racial integration varies by province; and that very few non-African students migrate into black African schools (Soudien & Sayed 2003).

However, despite these changes in the racial demography of schools, South Africa still has white-dominant schools in both public and private education. The significance of the racial profile of the elite schools of Cape Town's Southern Suburbs lies in the rather unique racial demographics of the Western Cape province in general, and of the city of Cape Town in particular. At the last census in 2011, coloured people formed the largest demographic group in the Western Cape province (48.8 per cent or 2.84 million), followed by Africans (32.85 per cent or 1.92 million) and whites (15.72 per cent or 915 000). In the greater city of Cape Town the ratios were more or less similar, with coloured citizens at 43.2 per cent, Africans at 39.4 per cent and whites at 16 per cent of the population. Indian South Africans constitute a little over 1 per cent of the population at both provincial and city levels (Statistics South Africa 2011).

This reality continues despite the fact that a majority-black government has been in place for more than 25 years in a country where 92 per cent of the population is black (80.8 per cent black African, 8.8 per cent coloured, 2.5 per cent Indian) and only 8 per cent white (Statistics South Africa 2017).

While most of South Africa's former white schools have, over time, been desegregated to a greater or lesser degree (Chisholm & Sujee 2006; Hunter 2010; Soudien & Sayed 2003), and some even resegregated from all-white to all-black (Vandeyar & Jansen 2008), this research is mainly concerned with those elite schools that have retained their status as majority-white schools more than two decades since the legal end of apartheid.

## The research questions

This study pursues several critical questions about elite, former white schools in the Southern Suburbs of Cape Town. The first set of questions concerns the micro-politics of school admissions:

- How do the elite schools select their students?
- How do parents choose schools?
- What are the overt, but also covert (unpublished), policy decisions that determine admissions?
- Who actually makes the admissions decisions of a school?
- When and how do schools make exceptions to criteria for admissions?
- What are the effects of the admissions policy on the racial and class profile of the school?
- How does the admissions policy of one former white school affect enrolments by race and class in other former white schools in the same neighbourhood?
- What are the effects of language policy on a school's enrolment profile, especially in the current and former Afrikaans-medium schools?
- How do schools justify exclusion—that is, of those whose applications for admission are unsuccessful?
- How do schools justify their elite status as predominantly white and privileged institutions in the context of inequality, poverty and dysfunction especially in black African, but also many coloured schools of the surrounding Cape Flats?
- What does a prospective parent need to know in order to access these schools?

The second set of questions concerns the macro-politics of education policy-making as it affects schools in South Africa. These broader questions are the following:

- What happened during the education negotiations of the early 1990s, as part of the constitutional negotiations, that enabled the governance settlement captured in the foundational policy documents of the new democracy? For example, how did schools, and in this case former white schools, come to retain control over admissions policy, including the language policy of a school?
- Why are the current governance arrangements regarding admissions policy allowed to continue? That is, why have the founding arrangements of the 1990s not been changed during more than 25 years of democracy?

In short, the research explains the admissions policies of the former white schools in the context of the broader politics of social transition over the course of South Africa's democracy.

## Focus, method, concepts and sample of study schools

In pursuit of these questions, this study sampled 30 highly sought-after former white primary schools along the wealthy corridor, from the City Bowl through the Southern Suburbs down to Fish Hoek on the False Bay coast, in order to understand their admissions decisions. The focus was not, therefore, on the almost exclusively white teaching staff of these schools, except, as will be shown, where the race of teachers became an issue for parents in making decisions about which schools they chose for their children.

The choice of white elite and middle-class schools for this study is only partly because these institutions are relatively unstudied in South Africa and abroad. As Javier Caletrío once asked of studies in education, why it is that in these times of great wealth inequality we are not studying elites? Why, moreover, are studies 'almost exclusively focused on the poor' (2012:136), rendering the elites and their actions invisible in unequal societies?

The main reason, however, for the choice of former white schools in South Africa is the need to make sense of the obvious paradox of the continued existence of wealthy, white-dominant schools in a black-majority country led by a post-apartheid government holding expressed political and policy commitments to redressing inequalities in schools and society.

The choice of primary schools, as already explained, is based on the observation that racial patterns of enrolment are established in the early years of preschool and formal education. As will be shown, the chances of sideway entry into later grades of primary school or high school are very slim, because children in the elite and middle-class institutions, with few exceptions, progress as a cohort from preschool to primary school to high school. Therefore, to understand why white-dominant schools exist in the first place, one has to examine how admissions decisions are made in the early years.

The limited focus of this study on *desegregation* means the research is concerned only with the degree of admission of black students to former white schools. 'Desegregation', as used in this book, is a neutral term concerned with 'enrolments by race', without commentary on the experiences of black (or, for that matter, white) children in white-dominant schools. The

corresponding focus on *resegregation* is due to this phenomenon's being simply one particular form of desegregation in the former white schools. This research does not, therefore, cover the *integration* of black students into the academic and cultural life of former white schools, on which subject there is a small but impressive set of studies in South Africa (Battersby 2004; Hunter 2019; Soudien 2004).

Nor does this research investigate the desegregation of former Indian and coloured schools. We do know that black African students from poorer township schools seek access to the relatively better-resourced and, in general, better-performing Indian and coloured schools as second-choice options when white schools are inaccessible (Soudien 1998). This is a legitimate area of enquiry for studies of the desegregation, integration and resegregation of Indian and coloured schools in demand by African students. However, this particular study is limited to former white schools in demand by parents from all four apartheid-designated 'racial groups'—white, Indian, coloured and African.

In the course of the study, it soon became evident that it was impossible to understand how the elite schools in question remained white without understanding how neighbourhood schools became black. In other words, a group of former white schools would 'desegregate' to varying degrees, with some remaining white-dominant and others in the same residential area 'turning black'. The interactive effects of desegregation among former white institutions is a new finding in education research, and in order to understand how this happens a relational account of race and admissions in suburban schools is required.

It was also found in the exploratory phase of this study that not all white schools could be described as 'elite', whether during or after apartheid. There was definitely a class differentiation within the community of white schools, from the wealthy English institutions to schools for working-class and poor whites, especially in the less affluent Afrikaans schools in less affluent neighbourhoods. These are important distinctions, since the nature and extent of desegregation, as well as the prospects for resegregation, depended on the class status of the former white schools. However, in relation to black schools, all former white schools could at one point be described as elite, since they carried significant material and educational advantages over disadvantaged black schools. How some schools lost their elite status in the process of desegregation, while other schools seemed to entrench such standing, is very much part of what this book seeks to explain.

The sample included both public and private primary schools. There was little distinction, in the levels of school fees charged or in the impressive infrastructure, between the wealthy public schools and private schools. The fact that the South African government had not placed a cap on private contributions by parents to public schools meant that the wealthier 'government' schools were, in effect, quasi-private schools, operating with little financial contribution from the state, despite the fact that many of them stood on public property. For these schools, both public and private, the white dominance, as reflected in enrolments, was very similar, as the data will show; there was thus no need to restrict this study to government schools.

The study of school admissions policies does, however, make a distinction between former white English and Afrikaans schools on grounds of language policy. In the white Afrikaans schools, language—more than any other policy instrument (such as fees or zoning)—determines the racial profile of a school's enrolments. English, on the other hand, is the preferred language of most students, regardless of their previous racial classification, and this fact impacts differently on enrolments in the elite and lower-middle-class Afrikaans schools. For this reason, a separate line of research is devoted to the study of race, language and the admissions policies of the former white Afrikaans schools in the areas studied.

The concept of 'white-dominant' schools refers to former white schools in which the majority of students enrolled are white. As indicated earlier, this concept of white dominance is reinforced by white-dominant and sometimes white-exclusive teaching staff in the elite schools, but also an emphatically white, Christian culture and curriculum orientation that reflects the social foundations of each school's past (Hunter 2019).

With this in mind, an uneasy but necessary distinction is made between white, Indian, coloured and African students. While this research recognises that these are apartheid-inspired racial categories that have no validity in human genetics, it is nevertheless the case that there is outright discrimination against African students in access and admission to former white schools (as discussed in various chapters in this book) and that students are treated differently in schools and classrooms based on these markers of an uneasy identity (Soudien 1998). While these inherited racial categories might therefore have no validity in human biology, they remain powerful in shaping human experiences and remain germane, for now, in the sociology of education. This work does, however, use the term 'black' when referring to African, coloured

and Indian students together as a group in contradistinction to white students; only when necessary in a specific context, such as discrimination within the group, is reference made to a specific identity, such as African or coloured.

The use of the term 'class' in this research, like race, merits some explanation. The study refers throughout to the current and changing class status of each of the former white schools in the sample. The concept of social class has many complex and contested meanings in the social sciences (Southall 2016). In this book, the class status of a school is conceived of simply in terms of subjective indicators such as the school fees charged, the level of infrastructural development, the extent of the extracurricular offerings, the dominant occupations of the parents and the number of fee-exempt students for whom the school receives compensation from the provincial department of education.

An elite school at the top of the class pyramid typically charges fees in excess of R40 000; hosts an impressive infrastructure that includes AstroTurf hockey fields and Tartan Track athletics fields, Olympic-size swimming pools and state-of-the-art media centres; offers extensive in- and after-school additional programmes, including dance, drama and music; and has a parent cohort of lawyers, doctors, dentists, business executives and other professionals. There are virtually no fee-exempt students at these mainly private schools, which include Highlands Girls' School, Spruce Girls' School, Capsicum School, Bishops Diocesan College and Richmond Primary School in the Southern Suburbs.[1]

A stable middle-class school charges fees in the range of R20 000 to R40 000; has a swimming pool and computer lab and some other basic facilities; offers a limited number of additional programmes, such as music education; and has parent occupations that include a mix of physicians and lawyers, but also teachers, clerks and municipal managers. There is a small but contained number of fee-exempt students in these solidly middle-class schools, which include Gunter Primary School, Westerford High School, Wynberg Girls' Junior School and Redding Primary School.

A fragile middle-class school in this study charges modest school fees in the region of R8 000 to R20 000. These schools might have an inherited swimming pool (from when it was a white school) and a basic computer

1 The primary schools in this study will be referred to by pseudonyms throughout the book, except in certain instances.

laboratory, but not much else. Individual parents might pay for an after-school music teacher. Many of the students travel to school using public transport, including taxis organised by parents from more distant areas such as Mitchells Plain and Khayelitsha. Parents include those who are unemployed as well as small business owners and clerical workers. These schools are often located in the former white areas that became coloured after 1994 due to the relatively affordable housing compared to the areas where the elite and stable middle-class schools are located. There are a significant number of fee-exempt students in this group of schools, which includes Southerns Primary School, Warrington Preparatory School, Royal Primary School and Marigold Primary School.

There are several important observations to be made about this simple conception of the class status of the schools in this study. First, the class status of a school is not a commentary on its academic performance; in fact, one of the commendable things about schools across this simple schema is that they have worked hard to maintain strong academic cultures regardless of class status. Second, there is a clear correspondence between the class status of the school and the extent of desegregation—the more elite schools are whiter than the lower-middle-class schools. And third, the class status of former white schools today more or less reflects their class status under apartheid. So, for example, Warrington Preparatory was a school for poor whites that had a feeding scheme for the children, while the elite schools have always been expensive institutions that are out of the reach of lower-middle-class families.

The primary instrument for data collection was on-site, semi-structured interviews. These interviews were conducted with senior officials of each school concerned with admissions (principals, secretaries, governing body members and activist parents). Focus group interviews in some schools brought together older teachers who had been with the school during the transition from apartheid and had witnessed changes in the racial profile of the students. Online admissions policies were provided by the schools or accessed from their websites; what was stated in the policies was compared to what was communicated in the interviews with key personnel. School publications were scrutinised, especially class photographs over decades, to determine transition points in enrolments by race. Further interviews were conducted with estate agents working in the suburbs around the schools and with senior provincial department officials directly concerned with school admissions policy in the Western Cape.

The authors commissioned the Centre for Geographic Analysis (CGA) at Stellenbosch University to map the schools. This critical exercise allowed for the mapping of the precise locations of former white schools along the elite corridor chosen for this study, as shown in Figure 1.4. But the mapping of schools also allowed for schools to be placed within the socioeconomic profiles of 'the small areas' (in the language of the census reports) within which a school or set of schools is located.

From its Centralised Education Management Information System (CEMIS), the Western Cape Education Department (WCED) provided the critical data on enrolments by race in each of the studied schools over time. This information was critical in providing an objective account of desegregation in the 30 primary schools, which often differed from the more positive impressions that principals had of the number of black students in their schools. GEM Information Systems (Pty) Ltd assisted in providing creative representations of the data for purposes of clarity and comparison across the set of schools studied.

A high premium was placed on the confidentiality of the data received from the schools and from the WCED. For this reason, schools and participants in the research are not identified by their real names. While every effort has been made to ensure the anonymity of people and schools, it is possible that details remain that might lead to the identification of a particular school by those familiar with the elite institutions of the areas in question.

Finally, while the sample of elite schools is drawn from the Southern Suburbs of Cape Town, it should be noted that the same distribution of privileged schools can be found in the Northern Suburbs of Johannesburg, in places such as Rosebank and Sandton (Bell & Morton McKay 2011), or in Durban's northern areas, such as Durban North, Morningside and Umhlanga, or stretching towards the Midlands, where some of the province's most expensive English schools (such as Hilton College, Michaelhouse and Maritzburg College) can be found (Hunter 2016). Similarly, elite schools in proximity to large areas of disadvantaged schools can also be found in smaller cities of the Eastern Cape, such as Port Elizabeth or Grahamstown (Lemon 2004). What makes the Southern Suburbs of Cape Town unique is the sheer concentration of elite schools along the long corridor from Simonstown through Fish Hoek to Cape Town, all within close proximity to hundreds of disadvantaged public schools in each area. The Southern Suburbs are, nonetheless, simply a case in point in a larger story about elite white schools in South Africa, their admissions policies and their resulting race and class profiles.

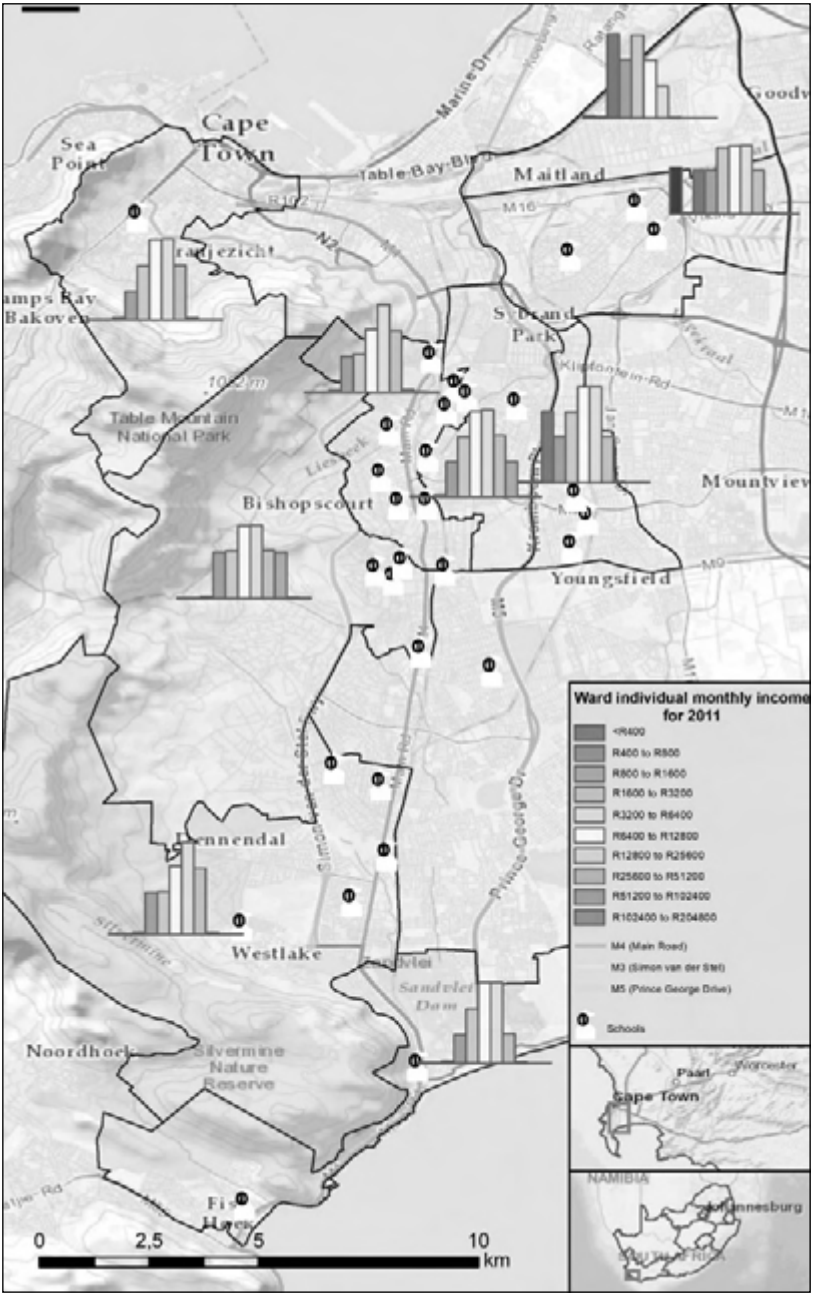


**Figure 1.4:** The 30 schools that participated in this study, along Cape Town's Southern Suburbs from the City Bowl to the False Bay coast
*Source: The Centre for Geographical Analysis, Stellenbosch University*

## Why the focus on admissions policies?

In South Africa, a school governing body (SGB) is empowered by legislation (principally the South African Schools Act [No 84 of 1996]) to exercise authority over the admissions and language policies of that school. While the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa requires 'no discrimination' in school and society, and each of the nine provinces offers broad policy guidelines for admissions within the proscriptions of the law, in effect each school is left to its own devices when it comes to the specifics of its admissions policy.

Once a governing body has approved the official admissions policy, it is left to the school leadership team, under the principal, to implement that policy. In the former white, elite schools of the Southern Suburbs, the exercise of admissions policy has far-reaching consequences for the race and class profiles of these prized institutions. Unlike other sectors of society, such as private sector companies or public sector institutions, schools are not required by law to demonstrate employment equity in staffing appointments, nor are they under as much pressure as universities to diversify the student body. The occasional media exposé about the treatment of a lone black teacher passes quickly from public attention, and there is hardly any public outcry about majority-white or even exclusively white school enrolments. In other words, a school's admission policy is seldom under political pressure to change, except from time to time when progressive parents at a particular school might press for transformation. Other than such ripples inside a school, admissions are executed with little oversight outside the routine approval of the policy by the provincial education department.

A school's admissions policy therefore largely escapes public scrutiny. What is published as a school's admissions policy in print or on the internet is taken at face value. Parents might challenge why their child was not admitted, but they seldom question the admissions policy itself. The question of fairness is often raised only in relation to another child, known to the unsuccessful parents, who lives in the same area that the school claims falls outside its catchment area.

Until now, there have been no sustained or in-depth studies of how exactly former white South African schools give effect to their admissions policies, or of how such decisions impact on 'who gets in' and 'who is left out' of these elite institutions.

## What we already know about research on majority-white schools

There is little systematic research available on race and admissions in primary schools. In the USA, much of the research on race and schools has to do with battles over the desegregation of public schooling in the wake of the landmark Supreme Court ruling of 1954 known by its shorthand name, *Brown vs Board of Education*. This ruling declared racially separate schooling to be unconstitutional. Since then, there have been numerous studies on the effectiveness of mandates to 'desegregate' schools, from busing policies in the 1960s (Delmont 2016) to school choice policies in the 1980s that enabled parents to choose preferred schools for their children (Orfield & Frankenberg 2013).

Despite decades of efforts at federal and state levels to desegregate schools, evidence points to the fact that US schools are now more segregated than they were in the years following *Brown vs Board of Education* (Orfield & Frankenberg 2013). Long-term studies on desegregation have been led by scholars such as Gary Orfield of the Harvard and UCLA Civil Rights Projects and his colleagues (Frankenberg 2013; Orfield & Frankenberg 2014).

The relevant observation to be made about these US studies on desegregation is that their concern is with deracialising majority-white schools through the inclusion of what Americans call 'minorities',[2] such as African Americans, Latinos and smaller ethnic groups. Moreover, their main focus is on leveraging legislation to desegregate white schools. The obvious distinction is that in South Africa the 'minorities' are white citizens and that efforts to desegregate these schools have to do with greater inclusion for majority black children in a relatively small number of white-dominant schools. And in South Africa, as will be shown, the major instruments for desegregation are not, in fact, national or provincial government policies, but what schools themselves do through the granted authority over their admissions policies.

In the UK, the major studies on school admissions and selectivity have been conducted by a relatively small group of researchers whose concerns have been with fairness and transparency with respect to official policies

2 This study accepts the view that while in everyday language use 'minorities' often refers to a demographic minority, it could also signal other kinds of marginalisation and discrimination beyond numbers.

(West & Hind 2006; see also West, Pennell & Noden 1998). Related studies explore how parents and students make decisions about schools—that is, what matters to them as they decide which school to attend (David, West & Ribbens 1994). While most of these studies were concluded in the 1990s and 2000s, they offer important insights into the conjoined problems of how schools decide whom to admit and how families decide which schools to attend.

This interesting research from the UK is not about elite schools, but concerns the public policies of the government as they affect admissions to comprehensive schools. The relevant observation for purposes of this South African study is that the UK research does not reference race as a factor in admissions decisions, although it is concerned with 'creaming criteria' in the selection of students. Once again, the context for these studies is traditional white schools and the degree of selectivity when admissions are controlled by the school or by the local authority. One focus of these studies related to a specific group is how and when students with special educational needs are selected by different admissions authorities (West, Hind & Pennell 2004).

The value of these studies is that they provide insight into policy instruments available to and used by schools to make determinations about 'who gets in and why'. In addition, such research points to the agency of families as a critical factor in choice decisions (Burgess et al 2011), something lacking in South African research to date.

Jane Kenway writes from Australia, and with colleagues from around the world; their research is known for producing insightful studies of elite schools (Kenway & McCarthy 2016). Kenway is concerned with how wealthy schools produce global elites in possession of the dispositions and mobilities that prepare them to become leaders and entrepreneurs under conditions of globalisation (Kenway et al 2017). Schools, we know, do far more than teach basic skills—they reproduce elites; the transnational character of these studies shows how the making of elites happens inside and across the most privileged schools in the world, from Singapore and Barbados to Cyprus and South Africa. The real power of these studies lies in showing how the British elite-school model connects a colonised past to a globalised present. While these schools from the colonies might be described as post-colonial—in the narrow sense of 'after colonialism'—they are not post-imperial, in the sense of the ongoing work of producing an elite class with aspirations for and connections to the metropoles. Such studies also make the vital point that in some contexts, such as South Africa, 'eliteness can simply mean whiteness' (McCarthy & Kenway 2016:7).

In South Africa, there has been a steady increase in the number of studies on the desegregation of former white schools, led by scholars such as Crain Soudien (2010) of UCT and Saloshna Vandeyar and her colleagues at the University of Pretoria (UP) (Vandeyar & Killen 2006). Initial studies focused on the courageous attempts by the Catholic Open Schools to admit black students (Christie 1990). In the early years of democracy, there were attempts to track progress towards desegregation across the nine provinces, but with mostly inadequate data sets from a system under construction from a state of racial and ethnic fragmentation to a single, national system of schools under a new government (Chisholm & Sujee 2006; Soudien & Sayed 2003).

There were regular media reports on 'racial incidents' involving conflict in desegregating schools, and these were sometimes followed by punchy reports in academic outlets (Alexander 2016; Jansen 2004; Jung & Seekings 1997; Van der Linde 2001). However, there were not many in-depth studies on the processes and politics of school desegregation. Geographers were among the few who offered new insights into desegregation, based on the spatial geographies of apartheid planning; admission to privileged schools, they found, was still tied to residential location (Hunter 2010; Lemon & Battersby-Lennard 2009b; McKay 2019).

Over time, more sophisticated studies emerged on what happens inside desegregating schools, with the focus on the experiences and perceptions of, especially, black students inside former white schools (Battersby 2004; Hengeveld & Daku 2015), but also in former coloured schools (Soudien 2004). The value of these studies is that they vividly describe the lives of black and white students learning and living together, often for the first time; the complexities of integration; the banality of everyday racism; and the modalities of assimilation into the culture and traditions of white schools (Soudien 2010). What such studies do not offer, however, is insight into which black students 'get in' to these elite schools as subjects of assimilation—and which ones do not.

This question of assimilation as a consequence of desegregation has also been a subject of enquiry in studies of elite South African schools. Ever since the publication of Peter Randall's (1982) superb master's thesis as the book *Little England on the Veld*, there has been a trickle of ethnographic studies on white, elite schools in South Africa. The model of the British school was established in the early days of colonial occupation, with English headmasters and headmistresses from overseas; a curriculum centred on

Europe; a mission to produce Christian gentlemen and gentlewomen; and a rigid set of values and traditions, from the student prefects to the gowned schoolmasters. These elite schools were often founded by the English and Scottish churches and carried forward all the trappings of the mother country, including memorials, which still stand, to South African old boys who fell in the Great War on the side of Empire (Henning 2019; Richardson 2018; Schroder 2019).

More recently, Debbie Epstein has demonstrated the continuities between the colonial past and the democratic present in her revealing research on 'lineages of privilege in an elite South African school' (2016:80). In Epstein's telling, the girls' school Greystone (a pseudonym) was set up to provide education for young ladies, the daughters of church leaders and colonial administrators. With the end of apartheid, smaller numbers of black girls were admitted to the school, mainly from middle-class Indian, coloured and African families. And as their social and cultural assimilation was secured at Greystone, so too were their social and economic futures assured as the next generation of affluent entrepreneurs and professionals. Once again, this insight into the operations of elite South African schools shows how whiteness is normalised and privilege reproduced, to the exclusion of the majority poor and working-class citizens whose children cannot even imagine accessing these institutions. It is in Epstein's study, unlike others, that the coalescing interests of black and white elites first enjoy fuller description in the post-apartheid literature on the desegregation of schools.

## The significance of this study

From this brief survey of the literature, it is evident that while there is a substantial body of work on the desegregation of schools, little is known about how former white, elite schools regulate student admissions in the context of a black-majority country, and about the consequences of such regulation for the racial and class profiles of these schools. One of the early South African studies that sensed the power of admissions in selecting students was conducted in two high schools in the Gauteng province barely 10 years after the advent of democracy (Beckmann & Karvelas 2006). Still, little is known about the full range of policy instruments deployed in schools more than 25 years since the end of apartheid, and about how these instruments work in primary education, where patterns of segregation and desegregation are first established.

Such knowledge is important, first of all, for reasons of scholarship. We do need to know how former white schools actually make decisions about access, as the authority for admissions policy rests principally in the hands of the school's governing structures. What such research reveals can deepen our understanding of 'who gets in and why' in privileged schools. This work will close a gap in the literature, since there is little existing research on how and with what consequences primary schools make crucial admissions decisions.

The findings of such research also have direct implications for education policy-making in a democracy concerned with issues of access, equity, diversity and social justice. All three levels of government (national, provincial and local) can use this research to inform policy choices as South Africa continues to grapple with the questions of social cohesion among black and white students and educational opportunities for all students.

And finally, the outcomes of this research could empower ordinary parents with knowledge about how to access quality education for their children. As this research will show, knowledge is not equally distributed between middle-class and wealthy parents, on the one hand, and working-class and poor parents on the other. Simple things such as knowing when to apply and what is required in an application can make a crucial difference in whether a child is admitted to a quality school or not.

## Conclusion

This is a work of scholarship; therefore, the research commitment is not only to *describe* as richly as possible how schools make consequential admissions decisions, but also to *explain* why the schools in question, so long after apartheid, remain predominantly white. In this regard, one of the standard questions from the sociology of education is whether it is race or class that explains white-dominant enrolments in the elite and stable middle-class schools of the Southern Suburbs of Cape Town.

It is the contention of this study that race and class both play powerful and intersecting roles in determining admissions outcomes in the schools of the Southern Suburbs; yet, such a simple formulation fails to capture the complex politics and continuing salience of race in admissions. On the one hand, black middle-class parents do gain access to the elite schools in small numbers and, more so, to the stable middle-class schools. At the same time, this study confirms the primacy of race in securing the admissions policies of white-dominant schools. This is reflected in the fact that white-dominant

institutions effectively absorb more white students within their numbers when black enrolments at other previously white-dominant schools increase beyond a tipping point, the result being resegregated schools (see Chapter 7). And yet black middle-class interests and white racial interests do not simply pass each other on the way to the school gates. They converge in ways not yet explained in extant theory, thereby providing a new insight into the intersection of race and class (see Chapter 9).

One graphic way in which to understand this complex interplay between race and class is through the heuristic of the spider's web of policies that keeps schools white—and black. This is explored in the next chapter.

# CHAPTER 2

# The Spider's Web of Policies That Keeps South African Schools White—and Black

*You pledge allegiance to justice for all … but when the choice comes down to your child … you betray your principles to the fierce unfairness of love.*

(Packer 2019)

*The spider's web is known for its tensile strength and its capacity to adapt to external threats, such as wind, without sustaining damage to the overall structure. The spider uses its web to cushion its young but also to capture its food. Webs are mostly invisible, unless made visible by elements such as the morning fog.*[1]

## Introduction

In an eye-opening 2018 address to one of South Africa's elite public schools, the South African College Schools, or SACS, as it is popularly known, the guest speaker pointed to the past and present glories of the school. An old boy himself, Christopher Hugo-Hamman spoke of three swimming pools and two arboreta, sensitively curated playing fields and 'the best in multimedia wireless connectivity and IT resource centres'. This Cape Town school was set, he reminded the audience, 'all in a glorious natural environment' over which 'Table Mountain and Devil's Peak stand guard over us in their glory'. A world traveller, the speaker would go on to claim that 'I can say with insight and conviction that this school is world class' and that 'the experience offered [at SACS] is easily in the top 0.1 per cent across the world'.

Then came the bombshell: 'We are grateful for our privilege, and realise that through no fault of my parents or mine, millions of people are worse off and don't deserve to be.' Interestingly, the speaker observed, 'Many of

1 Observations about the properties of spider's webs come from a general knowledge of spiders on the part of one of the authors as well as one particular reference by Lisa Zyga (2010) on the subject.

our ancestors came to South Africa and worked themselves out of poverty', even as he acknowledged the advantage of race that enabled parents at this school to afford the more than R40 000 in school fees alone. That said, Hugo-Hamman made the critical observation that he could not help but notice that there was little change in the racial demographics of South Africa's oldest school (founded in 1829), which had only '8 per cent black or African' students among the 28 per cent of students of colour.

That South Africa has white-dominant schools after apartheid is not an accident of history; it is a consequence of *apartheid* policies systematically designed to advance white citizens at the expense of black South Africans. That the legacy of segregated and unequal education remains so visibly in place is also not a result of neglect or inattention, but a consequence of *post-apartheid* government policies that sustain two parallel school systems with the pattern of bimodal performance in academic outcomes (Spaull & Jansen 2019). That white-dominant schools such as SACS continue to exist is not simply because of past benefits to white South Africans as a group, but because of conscious policy actions taken by predominantly white governing bodies in the present to keep these schools white. What are these policies that governing bodies use to sustain white-dominant schools, and how can they be understood? The heuristic of the spider's web offers powerful insights into the policies and actions of white-dominant schools.

## School admissions policies as a spider's web

Like the radial strings running from the centre of the spider's web, the admissions policies of former white schools in South Africa are composed of a number of strong threads that maintain the racial privilege of these elite institutions (see Figure 2.1). The connecting threads that stretch between the thicker radial threads represent the actions of middle-class black and white parents who, through their private resources, support and maintain the stronger radial threads.

On its own, none of the radial threads offers a strong enough backbone for maintaining the structure of the spider's web; for example, tuition fees alone cannot prevent the desegregation of schools, given the fee-exemption policy of government (Startz 2010). But together these various threads act to manage enrolments and maintain privilege in the elite schools of Cape Town's Southern Suburbs. As will be shown, many of these threads are invisible to poor and working-class parents seeking admission to the schools—until they feel the pain of exclusion.

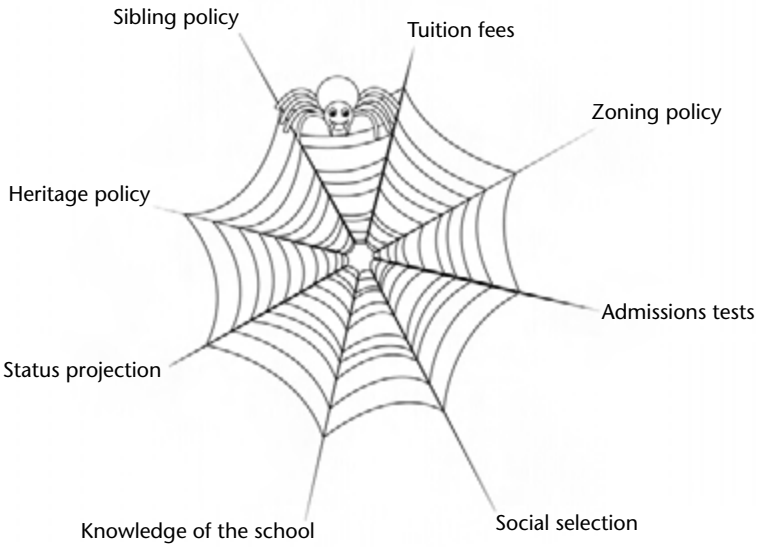


**Figure 2.1:** Elements of the admission policies of former white South African schools, represented as the radial threads of a spider's web

Over time, and under pressure to transform, elite schools have adapted by changing elements of their admissions policies. For example, all but two of the schools in this study claim to have done away with heritage status as a deciding factor in whether subsequent generations of children from a family gain automatic admission, and every elite school has admitted a small and, in some cases, growing number of black students, albeit mainly from middle-class families residing in the expensive suburbs. But these adaptations to external demands for change have had very little effect on the overall racial profile of the schools, given the other, more powerful policies that remain in place. Through this spider's web of admissions policies, the elite schools therefore offer a secure environment for children of middle-class and wealthy families, while at the same time benefiting from the private resources these families provide to sustain the privileges the schools give them.

What this research seeks to do is to make visible the often unseen spider's web of school admissions policies that enable and sustain the racial privilege of the elites. For struggling parents desperately seeking access to high-quality education for their children, the spider's web is seldom seen before it is felt.

## The main policy threads of the spider's web

There are powerful radial threads that compose the structure of the spider's web. More directly, a school's admissions policy consists of several policy instruments that keep its racial privileges intact (see Figure 2.1). Some of these are visible, such as tuition fees, zoning policies, sibling and heritage policies and admissions tests, while others are covert, namely social selection, knowledge of the school and the status that the school projects.

### Tuition fees

The most powerful thread is school (tuition) fees. School fees are set by the governing body and executed by the school management under the leadership of the principal. There is no statutory cap on the school fees; that is, a school governing body (SGB) can set the fees at any level without limits imposed by either the national or provincial departments of education. This was not always the case. Before 1994, the year that apartheid formally ended, school education was provided without charge by the state and nominal school fees enabled a public school to add to and enrich the curriculum, by funding such things as field trips for the children or after-school supplementary programmes. All teachers were paid by the state, so there was, at the time, no need to create special positions, called 'governing body posts', whereby the school governance authority pays for additional teachers.

In the 1990s, the white government of the time decided to 'rationalise' teacher posts as the costs of formally equalising education for black and white schools after apartheid came into view. Schools lost teachers during this rationalisation, especially those under the authority of the so-called coloured system of education governed by the oddly named House of Representatives, the coloured chamber of the Tricameral Parliament. It was also at this time that the apartheid state decided to give options to white government schools to decide on one of four models for state-aided education; the government would pay either the full or partial costs of white schools, depending on the model chosen. The models offered combinations of more authority over admissions by governing bodies in exchange for less funding from the state. Eventually, all white schools were made state-aided schools, which meant a reduction in state funding for schools, but with the understanding that these schools could levy parents by means of school fees to make up for shortfalls from government. These new arrangements formed part of the constitutional negotiations to end

apartheid (see Chapter 9 for a fuller explanation), and to this day schools charge fees ranging from modest to exorbitant.

Black schools cannot afford to charge high fees, given that their parents are mostly from poor and working-class communities. A post-apartheid policy enabled many of these schools to become what is called 'fee-free schools', and they occupy the lowest quintile (ranking by relative wealth or poverty of a school). The Quintile 1 schools form the poorest set of schools and those in Quintile 5 are the most well-off. Schools in the lower quintiles (1–3) therefore receive more government funding than those in the upper quintiles (4 and 5).

The fee-free schools, however, receive a limited amount of funding from government based on a per capita count of the number of poor students in the school. All of the teachers' salaries, as well as textbooks and administration costs, are fully funded by government. But the limited funding means the schools cannot do much beyond the basic education functions, and it also often means large class sizes and principals who teach a class. By contrast, the Quintile 5 schools, as will be seen, can leverage limitless amounts of private funding through parent contributions, which enables them to hire extra teachers, add to already spectacular facilities and build a war chest for further enhancement of the school.

In short, these policy decisions—fee-free schools for the poor and uncapped private fees for the middle classes—had the effect of the rich getting richer and the poor staying in their place. While politicians of the new government held up the fee-free arrangements for black schools as an instance of progressive policy, these arrangements suffered from what education finance specialist Christina Amsterdam (2006) called the problem of *adequacy*. There was simply not enough funding for the basic needs of poor schools. Worse, the funding available could never close the gap between the facilities of even modest former white schools and those inherited by black schools from the long years of colonialism and apartheid.

Against this backdrop, school fees have become the most important instrument in determining who gets in and who is excluded from South Africa's elite schools. No other policy instrument is as decisive as the affordability of school fees. The middle classes, white and black, are therefore the ones left to compete for access to these schools, in which bursaries or scholarships are rare, especially in elite primary schools. The working classes and the poor come to understand the futility of even applying to the upmarket

elite schools; as one study concluded, 'working class parents may well learn to be less ambitious' for their children (Noden et al 1998:235).

Setting high fees is a relatively simple act. How and why those fee structures are applied in the scramble for access to limited places in an elite school is the subject of a more extended analysis in Chapter 4. For now, the point is simply that fees are potent exclusionary devices which are leveraged even before other policy instruments, such as geographical proximity to the school.

## Zoning policies

Schools can set their own admissions policies, and therefore another thick strand in the spider's web is *proximity to the school*. If a family lives in the catchment area of the school, or 'the zone' determined by the school, then their chances of admission are very good, but not guaranteed. The notion of a child attending the school closest to home is a standard feature of admissions policies in many countries. It was also an acceptable feature of admissions decisions even in the years before democracy in 1994. If a school is in high demand and needs to choose among applicants, then of course 'zoning' appears to make good sense as an instrument for deciding whom to admit or not.

The problem with a rigid application of zoning, however, is the close association between residential segregation and school segregation. South Africa was divided by the Group Areas Act (No 41 of 1950) into white and black areas. As with everything else, white areas were set in the most socially attractive and economically prosperous parts of a city and its suburbs, while black areas were typically underdeveloped and unattractive. With the forced removals of black people from well-positioned areas in and around the cities, many white South Africans found themselves settled in the most attractive suburban areas of Cape Town, Johannesburg, Durban, Port Elizabeth and other cities. In the seaside suburbs, for example, stand some of the most expensive residences, just as in other attractive areas, such as the vineyards of the Cape or the rich farming areas of the northern provinces. In and around these prime residential areas are some of the country's most elite schools, serving the surrounding communities.

A strict zoning policy therefore means that a school would draw students only from its surrounding community. In this way, the whiteness of a school would reinforce and be reinforced by the whiteness of the suburb.

This would especially be the case in the more expensive suburbs, where one would also find the most expensive schools. In a narrow sense, therefore, schools reproduce the social order, given the tight connections between school and community.

It is, of course, true that the post-apartheid era saw rapid growth in the development of a black middle class (Southall 2016). With barriers to advancement broken down, and boosted by government investment in the development of the black middle classes, the impact of these new developments was felt immediately in education. Almost every one of the former white universities have, over time, become majority-black after the blocking effects of racist admissions criteria eventually fell, and as government invested more and more funds in the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) to make degree studies more affordable for black students.

Unlike universities, though, schools had more obstacles to admission besides whites-only admissions and tuition fees. Living close to the school is one such block that has had devastating effects on who gets in and who is left out. In addition, the tuition fees of the white elite schools were often far in excess of those of the former white universities. Universities, and particularly the former white campuses, were under close watch, and indeed under growing pressure from the national government to refrain from raising tuition fees beyond the capacity of the majority poor students. It was, in fact, the increases in fees which led to the unprecedented student protests of 2015–2016 that changed the landscape of higher education in the country (Habib 2019; Jansen 2017). The former white schools have had no such pressure to contend with, at least not from the democratic government.

What did change, however, was the small but influential number of black middle-class parents now living within the white suburbs and qualifying for admission to the white schools, at least on the grounds of being 'in the zone', so to speak. But these numbers, as subsequent chapters will show, are small enough not to disturb the majority-white status of the school. At the same time, the small numbers of black students are used to prove that the school is, in fact, open to all, even if 'we are not there yet' or 'we have a long way to go'—qualifiers often made by majority-white schools in this study.

The zone as policy instrument is not fixed or immutable. It is set by the governing body, often on the counsel of the school management, and can be changed from one year to the next depending on the needs of the school. Where zones are strictly enforced, it is often because of very high demand

for limited places. Given the history of residential segregation, the cut-off points for zones often appear where the white suburb ends and the coloured suburb begins, as in the case of the Southern Suburbs of Cape Town. Schools in Rondebosch, for example, would often give Milner Road (named after the colonial administrator who became governor of the Cape) as the cut-off point separating this majority-white neighbourhood from Rondebosch East, where more middle-class coloured families reside.

Taken together with high school fees, the zoning policy of a school sets fairly tight restrictions on admissions to an elite school. Add an additional double thread, sibling and heritage privilege, to the mix of policy instruments, and the spider's web tightens considerably.

## Sibling and heritage policies

All of the former white schools have a sibling policy and have either had or continue to have a heritage policy that, together, determine admission to these elite institutions. Both these policies enjoy longstanding status in the former white schools. The sibling policy holds that if a brother or sister is already enrolled at the school, then the new applicant is automatically enrolled. Some schools have a condition attached, for example that the sibling, while enjoying priority, must also meet other criteria, such as passing an admissions test. But in general, a sibling at the school seals the deal for a new applicant—with significant consequences for those applicants without siblings, as will be shown in Chapter 5, where the workings of such a policy in the decision-making processes of schools are more fully described.

Heritage policy, which goes by various names in different schools, means that an applicant who had parents or grandparents at the school in the past also enjoys automatic access. Since many of the elite schools in the study are more than 50 years old and a few are centenarians, heritage plays a critical role in who is admitted and who is left out. The more sibling and heritage students there are among the applications, the fewer places are available for first-time students with no current or past familial connections to the school. And here is the crucial point: since these old schools were exclusively white for decades, those who enjoy privileged access under these twin policies are mainly white. The result is that the transformation of a school into a more diverse educational institution is constrained.

From the perspective of the school, the sibling and heritage policies tie families to a school. In middle-class families, these ties build loyalty to

the school over generations, with direct consequences in terms of the much-needed financial contributions from well-off alumni. Many of these schools have powerful old-boy (and to a lesser extent, old-girl) associations that meet regularly on the school grounds to confirm loyalty to their *alma mater* and to pledge support for a new building, computer room or hockey field, and so on. Having a third- or fourth-generation offspring at the school carries very strong emotional ties for a family, and this often translates into generous giving to the school. In this simple way, the privilege and status of a school is secured through stories of times gone by and through gifts to secure the future of the beloved school.

Several schools in this study claim to have done away with their heritage policies over time, but many informal discussions with those knowledgeable about these schools provide evidence that the practice continues, if only informally. It does not really matter, though, for the sibling policy, taken together with high school fees and strict zoning measures, is enough to ensure limited change in the enrolment patterns of the former white schools. One policy recognises an immediate past (siblings enrolled in recent years) and the other a distant past (family members once enrolled), but together they reinforce privileged status and, in the context of South Africa, the white-majority status of these privileged schools.

## Admissions tests

Officially, schools are prohibited from conducting admissions tests as part of their entrance requirements. Government policy about this is explicit, and for a simple reason. Tests of academic achievement would, of course, favour those children who attended quality preschools and who have had the advantage of books and educated parents at home. It is clear from research that the head start provided by quality preschool experiences not only advantages children who enjoyed such exposure, but that the gap created between them and disadvantaged children does not close over the years of formal education (Spaull & Kotze 2015). Any admissions test could, therefore, be discriminatory of those who did not enjoy quality preschool education.

The South African government prides itself on the provision of an official reception year preceding Grade 1, and it has unveiled ambitions for expanding this to two years, as was stated in the President's 2019 State of the Nation Address (Ramaphosa 2019). And yet this is one of those symbolic policy statements that carry great emotional and political weight in public

discourse but have little purchase in the reality of preschool education. As comprehensive research has shown, the problem is no longer the absence of preschool facilities for the poor—although that is still the case in rural areas—but that the quality of such education amounts to little more than day care (Ashley-Cooper, Van Niekerk & Atmore 2019). Contrast that experience of preschool education with the one enjoyed by the middle classes, with highly qualified teachers skilled in progressive methodologies for teaching young children inside well-equipped facilities, along with additional staff for learning support and remediation, as necessary.

For these reasons, an aptitude test for admissions would simply serve to confirm advantage and disadvantage. However, schools do conduct admissions tests of various other kinds. In many cases, this involves interviews with the children for Grade 1 admissions; with smaller children, a school typically interviews the parent/s and observes the child in some organised form of structured play in order to make an assessment of the readiness for school. In those schools that offer special education to children with learning disabilities, this particular set of exercises is much more structured and is conducted with the aid of trained professionals.

Every school in this study, bar one, speaks of these admissions tests as 'placement tests'; that is, the tests are not designed to decide who gets in or not, but to determine appropriate levels of support. It is difficult to know whether this is true, since those determinations are not made public by any of the elite schools. However, one candid retiring principal of an elite public school ('I have nothing to lose,' he would preface this disclosure) made no bones about the fact that the tests were instrumental in admitting some students and denying admittance to others.

## Social selection

Much less visible to parental applicants is the role of social selection in choosing which students to admit to a school. In this regard, it is useful to remember that the elite schools of the Southern Suburbs are products of the British school system. There is, as will be shown in Chapter 6, more than a whiff of class consideration in selections, with criteria that extend beyond the more objective measures such as ability to pay, geographic proximity to the school or the enrolment of a sibling.

The elite schools among the former white institutions look for much more than test scores or place of residence. A critical discovery in this regard

was a questionnaire of three or more pages dispatched to 'the sending school' by a high school to which primary school graduates (Grade 7s) apply for admission to Grade 8. The form codifies social selection, since the questions have little to do with the academic merits of the application or the strength of the candidate for academic studies in a prestigious high school. Rather, they are about the income levels of the parents; their track record in making payments on time; their debt situation; the behaviour of the child, including any record of disciplinary problems; and other social criteria that might hint at a problem parent in terms of finances or a problem student for purposes of classroom management. In short, are these respectable parents with well-bred children?

Social selection is powerful precisely because it is an invisible thread in the spider's web of policy instruments deployed by a school. You can never be sure if you will pass muster when it comes to such behind-the-scenes decisions as the social suitability of the family or the child for an elite school. It is social selection that explains the observation, made often by parents, that two children who are neighbours might find that one is selected and the other not, even though they live in or outside the same geographical zone marked by the school. It is why the child of a gangster does not get in, even though the family, with its suspect resources, can afford to live in the school's catchment area.

Because they are based largely on instinctual criteria, social selection decisions are not easily pinned down. It can be, as will be shown in Chapter 6, a judgement about the photograph accompanying an application. Or it could come from a study of the parent's salary slip, where required. Or it could be based on the ability to pay a hefty non-refundable deposit, which the school claims is to discourage simultaneous application to other schools, but which serves handily as a sign of whether the parent is financially competent to scale this first social hurdle. Some parents, out of desperation, find the funds to meet this criterion, only to be ejected from the school as debt mounts and they are unable to maintain payments for subsequent fees.

Social selection, more than any other instrument, entrenches the class status of the school. By filtering out some students, the school ensures that those young people entering the elite institution carry with them a particular class profile that is quietly reproduced from one year to the next. In a Darwinian sense, social selection is harsh, and only the fittest are retained in these elite schools, while the rest compete for places in what are called

ordinary public schools. Once again, the fittest turn out to be white. The few black students who make the cut are also mainly from middle-class and sometimes wealthy families and come in with the necessary resources, material and cultural, to fit into the elite school environment.

## Knowledge of the school

Like social selection, knowledge of the school is an invisible thread in the spider's web. The lack of such knowledge is not necessarily the negligent absence of critical information that parents should know when applying to a school. Rather, as this study will show, ignorance of the school is sometimes wilfully arranged in the elite majority-white schools through, for example, a managerial decision not to advertise these invisible criteria, or not publishing the critical information on the school's website.

To be sure, poor and working-class families may simply not know where a school is, or how it decides places by having families queue overnight outside its gates. Sometimes, the school is hidden away inside leafy suburban areas and known only to those living within the immediate neighbourhood. When news of schooling opportunities does break out, it is primarily by word of mouth among the middle classes and the wealthy. In other words, apartheid's residential segregation did its job well—it not only restricted black people to areas well outside the confines of the white suburbs, but also ensured that knowledge of the assets of those suburbs, such as elite schools, remained hidden from view as well.

Middle-class parents can now find schools within a broad area by using the internet and searching for 'top schools in Constantia or Upper Claremont', but the working classes and the poor seldom have access to online search engines and the GIS tools needed to locate the elite institutions. To be able to find well-hidden boutique girls' schools, such as Mulberry Girls' School or Gosling Girls' School, a parent therefore requires historical knowledge of the school (for example through a family member who attended it), access to a network of middle-class families who spread the word among each other, or access to online search facilities to obtain vital information. Ignorance, it follows, is not just an unfortunate lack of information, but something organised within the very social structures that separate privileged from poor families by race, and increasingly by social class as well.

Where former white schools are immediately visible—situated along a major public transport route, adjacent to a coloured suburb (by quirk

of history) or in a poorer white suburb that had rapidly gained coloured homeowners—those schools quickly become black. Knowledge of the school in such cases comes from literally seeing the school—from the public train station (such as Zeeman Academy), the nearby coloured area (such as Royal Primary School) or the once-white homes now occupied by coloured residents (such as Southerns Primary School).

As the aphorism has it, knowledge is power. Knowing where a school is and what its explicit and covert rules of admissions are gives access to quality education, a university-level pass and a good job on graduation. Ignorance means being destined to a life of struggle and striving to overcome the accident of birth into a working-class or poor family. Not knowing is destiny, as this study will show. Withholding critical knowledge from prospective applicant families effectively dooms their children to inferior education and poor life chances.

## Status projection

In the Southern Suburbs, as elsewhere, there is a close connection in the public mind between a residential area and the schools within it. Locals know that the schools in Upper Claremont and Newlands enjoy higher status than the schools in Pinelands and Bergvliet. There is a strong sense of hierarchy among schools and particular suburbs. To reinforce these social arrangements, the elite schools actively promote their prestige and project their status to the outside world.

Prestige, says Moshe Tatar, is 'that special quality which endows select schools with an aura of distinction' (1995:93). It is not, however, a latent quality of elite schools but something that is actively produced through a series of real and symbolic actions. The projection of prestige is, moreover, a well-thought-out marketing strategy that presents the school in a positive light to prospective applicants. So, while the school selects its students carefully through the policy instruments described earlier (fees, zoning, admissions tests, etc), it still competes with neighbouring elite schools for the cream of students.

The prestige-enhancing actions of a school revolve, first of all, around the magnificence of its infrastructure. On this point Natasha Robinson (2019), citing the words of an alumnus, observes that 'the elite Cape Town southern suburbs schools are in a regressive competition to "out-infrastructure" each other in a constant attempt to be "better"'. In the process, Robinson concludes, the inequality becomes worse as these schools become 'more and more elite, more expensive and more exclusive as a result' (2019).

Nothing projects status more visibly than the excellent facilities of the elite schools, from rolling green lawns that run on forever to the sight of new buildings going up in another corner of campus. Top schools take parents on a tour of these facilities to make that impression real. The AstroTurf field(s) features prominently in marketing content, as well as the perfectly groomed, bright green rugby fields; the media room and computer facilities; the swimming pools; and the well-stocked, cosy libraries. In the prestige schools, there is always construction under way, and some have a dedicated 'building fund' that finances future extensions or improvements on the already impressive infrastructure. It is as if the value of the school resides in the property and what it contains.

Schools also project prestige by publicising their examination results, particularly in the case of the elite high schools. The number of Bachelor's (or university-qualifying) passes appear alongside the 100 per cent pass rate, and sometimes the top schools take out prominent advertisements in the provincial newspapers to position themselves positively in their marketing areas. In primary schools, the small class sizes invariably appear as a point of prestige on the school's website. While there might be disputes among education experts about the relationship between class size and academic achievement, for parents there is no such doubt—for them a small class means their child gets personal attention, whether or not this is the case in reality. Large classes are what the less prestigious schools do.

Of course, there is no objective measure of prestige for a school, which makes the projection of privilege a powerful tool in the hands of an institution. And it can also be frustrating for schools that believe they offer the same quality of education but are regarded less well because of this hard-to-measure quality called 'prestige'. Prestige, moreover, is closely tied to the social class of the school and its community. More prestige is afforded to schools with wealthy parents than those in the middle and lower classes. Wealthy parents pay higher fees for schools with impressive infrastructure. It is this intimate connection between social class and school prestige that sets the elite schools apart from the ordinary middle-class schools, and which in turn sets the latter group apart from working-class and poor schools.

## The role of parents in maintaining the spider's web

It is not only that schools choose students; parents choose schools for their children. Wealthy and middle-class parents have options among the elite schools, even though they are not always sure their children will get into

their school of first choice. Nevertheless, these are parents who live in the area, can afford the fees and may have other children at the school or be alumni of the first-choice school. They are well placed for the admission of their children and can now choose among schools.

Once in, these are the parents who, through tuition fees and other financial contributions, maintain and extend the facilities of the school and help fund the introduction of new programmes. A particularly wealthy parent might even, for example, completely fund a new media centre or use their company to do vital renovations to the school hall. These parents can make good on the expectation of the school that families contribute to the school in some way.

It is these parents who also bring social capital into a school. A parent can offer legal advice on a challenge from another parent or from the provincial department of education. These parents have connections to auditing and accounting firms, as well as management and leadership resources. They can and do 'connect' the school to important resources in the city and the country. They bring that social capital onto the SGB and offer specialist knowledge that less affluent schools seldom possess.

Such parents add to the prestige of a school. A famous surgeon, a senior attorney in a well-known law firm or a successful venture capitalist—these are all good for the school. School leaders seldom miss an opportunity to tell outsiders of their accomplished parents, some of whom are also distinguished alumni of the school. The children of such parents are certainly going to be chosen over those whose parents are bricklayers, car salesmen or clerks.

Of course, the lower-middle and working classes do not have such options. They have little discretionary funding and mostly work for bosses. Their concern is simply keeping up with the school fees and surviving economic stress on a day-to-day basis. For them, leisure is a privilege of the middle classes, where mothers in a patriarchal society can work from home or simply raise children while they are still at school. These more affluent mothers can manage bake sales, or help organise school outings and serve as chaperones, or serve on one or more school committees.

The elite parents represent the cross-threads of the spider's web. It is their wealth and effort that strengthen the radial threads that represent the key policy instruments of the school. Without these parents, the policies would be ineffective, even meaningless. For example, high school fees would be inaccessible, and the projection of prestige would be unsustainable. This

is what happened at former white schools that turned black; they were forced to levy lower school fees among working-class and poor parents who could contribute little else. An example of the result is what happened at Marigold Primary School, where the swimming pool was not maintained regularly and there was the real threat of it becoming unusable. It is, therefore, parents with means that give the admissions policy its power in selection decisions.

Middle-class and wealthy parents are thus the preferred and sought-after parents because of the social and financial capital they bring into a school. But, just as quickly as these parents can choose a school, they can abandon it. A scandal, such as a principal being accused of abusing school funds for personal use, will have an impact on prospective parents, as happened at Royal Primary School. A racial protest by black girls against the hair policy of a former white school scares off current and future middle-class parents, who simply go searching for schools elsewhere in the suburbs—this was the case at Sans Souci Girls' High School. Both Royal Primary School and Sans Souci turned black in a relatively short period of time.

Former white schools are therefore more than a little concerned about how a crisis at the school might impact future enrolments. It should be said, though, that middle-class parents at elite schools seldom leave when a racial incident suggests the school is protecting its 'standards' by not retaining a lone black teacher, as was the case at Ravenswood Girls' Junior School. And white middle-class parents will continue to choose such a school for their children, precisely because it 'upholds standards', despite the public outcry about alleged racism.

## How a school's admissions policy works in practice

No two spider's webs are identical, say scientists, even ones from the same spider. While all of the primary schools represented in this book use most, if not all, of the policy instruments that form the radial threads of the spider's web, there is considerable variation in how this is done. As we have seen, several schools appear to have dropped heritage as a factor in admissions, while for others it is still relevant. Most schools use tuition fees and the ability to pay as a first point of exclusion, while a few seek bursaries for children, allow fee-exemption applications or allow white parents to pay for the child of their domestic worker, for example, to attend the school.

Zoning policies are applied by most schools, but in the case of one very expensive private school this is not required, since the fees of more than

R100 000 per annum mean that a family's capacity to afford the tuition costs becomes the single most important requirement, regardless of where the family lives. In fact, since the school receives no funding from government, it relies on any and every student it can attract. Even one or two students withdrawing from the school has huge implications for staffing levels, given the sums involved.

At the same time, the zoning policy, for example, is highly flexible for many schools. Low enrolment in a particular year could see the zone extended beyond a certain delimited area. Excessive enrolment in another year could lead to a contraction of the zone. There is similar flexibility in the use of admissions tests and whether they are used solely for placement and support or for selection as well.

On its own, one policy instrument has little effect on a school's admissions decisions or its subsequent admissions profile by race or class. Taken together, though, the policies act as a powerful set of instruments in deciding who gets in and who is kept out. Minor adjustments in the set of instruments have little effect on the elite schools, given the power of the whole. A school could therefore drop the heritage requirement—the most obvious instance of snobbery and the reproduction of white privilege—and still achieve the same enrolment outcomes, because of the influence of other instruments.

The key to understanding a spider's web is to appreciate its flexibility. It can change and adapt as a result of strong winds and yet retain its shape and function. This is the case with the admissions policies of the former white schools. As the end of apartheid loomed, many of these schools gradually opened their doors to black students, but it was done in a controlled way so that the schools remained white and privileged, as they do to this day. Provided the schools could prove that there was no discrimination against black students, they were working within the precepts of the democratic Constitution. The admission of some black students therefore proves, according to these schools, that they do not discriminate on grounds of race. The schools therefore need black students but, as this study will show, particularly black students selected by class and culture, to defend in the face of critics their open and non-discriminatory credentials.

The policy instruments used in the admissions processes of a school are of two types: direct and indirect. The direct policy instruments are the ones advertised in the admissions policy and are therefore visible to potential applicants. These include the sibling policy and tuition fees. The

indirect policy instruments are those that have a bearing on applications, and eventually on admissions, but are not visible to those seeking a place at an elite school. These include social selection and knowledge of the school. These invisible elements of the admissions process have a disproportionate influence on working-class and poor parents, because these parents simply do not know about the critical factors that can contribute to being turned down by a school. In the case of a spider's web, you only feel the web once you walk into it. Similarly, non-successful applicants only feel the pain of exclusion once they are informed that they fall short of the admissions standards of a school—not only the overt but also the covert or invisible instruments of policy.

The spider's web has two basic functions: to provide a comfortable cushion for its young and a deadly trap for its prey. The elite white-dominant schools have been able to secure the racial privileges of their schools for successive generations of white middle-class and wealthy students. These children and youth gain access to the social, academic and cultural benefits of the schools that once taught their parents and grandparents. Little has changed in the elite schools, apart from the sprinkling of black students among their numbers. This is no accident; it is inherent in the design of the school's admissions policies.

At the same time, these schools are difficult places for the minority of black students who find a place within them. From time to time, there is a revolt at these schools against their taken-for-granted assimilationist practices. This was the case at prestigious schools such as Sans Souci Girls' High School in Cape Town and Pretoria High School for Girls, where young women rebelled against the 'white hair policies' of the two institutions. Graduates would speak openly about the horrors of linguistic and cultural exclusion at these white schools, and of the schools trying to make black students white. Students would lament their attempts to fit in, their adoption of a white accent and their acceptance, while at school, of otherwise strange social and cultural practices.

A school's admissions policy therefore carries out both functions of the metaphorical spider's web—cushioning and crushing—but not all on its own. *Who gets in* is also a function of estate agents, who fulfil the role of directing parents towards particular schools. While there are codes of ethics governing the behaviour of estate agents, there is evidence in the literature that agents sometimes channel parents towards particular

schools. It is called steering—'the process of influencing a buyer's choice of communities based on the buyer's race, color, religion, gender, disability, familial status or national origin', and '[n]owhere is this more of an issue than when the question of schools comes up during the homebuyer search' (NAR 2014).

Consider, for example, this advertisement by Victoria's Property Secrets in the Southern Suburbs: 'ON SHOW this Sunday 2–5pm! Stunning, Luxurious, Family Home in Sweet Valley Catchment! R5 400 000 Bergvliet.' What prospective buyers are really being told here is that this expensive home of R5.4 million lies within the zone, or 'catchment area', of one of the whitest and most sought-after of the former white schools in the Southern Suburbs, Sweet Valley Primary School. This is an explicit direction toward a specific school, and it reaffirms the strong connection between school and property in how estate agents do their work, as another of Victoria's online advertisements makes clear: 'Spacious Family Home Close to Good Schools! R3 195 000 Diep River.'

In the course of being shown around to various properties, a buyer would invariably ask the estate agent about the best schools in a suburb. The code of ethics for estate agents stipulates that agents may not unduly influence a buyer's choice of schools. And yet it is a common practice among estate agents to point out the schools without a good reputation and steer the buyer towards a nearby property. Similarly, the agent might share information about schools that have become mainly black and, by implication, where the standards are assumed to have dropped. An agent might say which school his or her own children attend, or attended, or where past buyers prefer to send their children. A buyer moving from another city to Cape Town who does not know the layout of Southern Suburbs schools would depend on this critical information.

Estate agents know their area better than anyone and can access data on who buys where and at what costs over a period of months or years. They are therefore informed professionals who can offer vital information to a potential buyer. Being seen to be helpful in this way, ethics apart, can play a role in the decision of a client to purchase a property in the agent's portfolio. No part of this exchange is recorded, and the informal steering would be known only to the agent and the client. The estate agent, then, has a role in school choice selection by parents, and this is one area in which systematic research is lacking in South Africa.

## Policy insights from the admissions policies of schools

So, what does the framing of admissions policy as akin to a spider's web mean for the understanding of policy in South Africa? This presentation of the conceptual framework for this study—the spider's web—not only illustrates a number of things known about policy but also enriches policy studies through insights into the admissions policies of former white schools in South Africa. This conclusion draws on critical insights from education policy studies and demonstrates the value of that body of work for this particular research.

To begin with, a policy is best understood as a broad guideline for action. It is seldom rigid in its application, as in the case of admissions. As we have seen, this quality of a policy means that different schools can *interpret* that policy rather than simply *implement* it in a mechanical way. Such acts of interpretation are therefore entirely subject to human agency, such as that of the SGB and the principal and his or her team.

Government policy guiding admissions at schools is deliberately broad. A school should not discriminate, according to the Constitution and the policy documents that flow from it, such as the National Education Policy Act (No 27 of 1996) and the South African Schools Act (No 84 of 1996). The compliance bar, in this respect, is low, and with a minority of black students in the elite schools this hurdle is easily crossed from the perspective of the schools, even if there is the occasional handwringing about not having 'enough' students of colour.

The broadness and non-directive nature of admissions policy means that an SGB can 'fill in' the policy with content that serves its purposes, including exorbitant school fees and adjustable zoning borders. Policy, like nature, abhors a vacuum, and the various ways in which schools give specific content to broad departmental guidelines are not unusual in policy studies.

The interpretation of a policy always has unintended consequences. A policy that is intended to pursue equity and non-discrimination reveals itself to be a policy that maintains white dominance in the elite schools. But is the status quo a result of unintended consequences, or a deliberate plan to keep schools mainly white? The study of motives lies beyond the scope of this enquiry, but it is clear that there is a mismatch between what schools say their intentions are (having more black students) and what the end result is (majority-white students).

On the other hand, one of the unforeseen consequences of policy is that a former white school could change completely as a result of the broader social context in which it is located. This, as we will show, is very much the outcome that results from a school being visible on a public transport route, for example. The shape that a policy takes depends, therefore, on the context of its 'implementation' and this, too, explains the variation in desegregation outcomes across the various schools. What this means is that school change could happen in ways that policy can neither predict nor forestall, and this insight, as we will see, underlines the limits of policy when it comes to the admissions decisions of a school.

A policy is adaptive over time in light of the concerns or needs of a school. A school concerned with its racial demographics would adjust the policy-defined zones to attract more black applicants or reduce the catchment area where demand is excessive. Such changes happen within the ambit of broader commitments to complying with non-discrimination requirements and, in the case of the elite schools, without disrupting the narrower commitments to protecting privilege. As the school changes, on the other hand, the policy has to adapt to the new realities of school demographics, as in the case of schools that have 'turned black'.

The instruments of policy exist in a symbiotic relationship in which there are mutually supportive arrangements among the different threads. So, for example, the radial threads support each other in keeping the spider's web of admissions policy intact. High fees come from residences in expensive suburbs, from parents with a longstanding relationship to the local school through, for example, family members who attended it in the past or siblings enrolled there in the present. On the other hand, the radial threads are supported by the cross-threads of parental support, in that private resources from middle-class and wealthy families make high fees possible and add value to the school's prestige through, for example, the funding of additional infrastructure. Without the financial support of wealthy parents, the elite school's fees would be out of reach even for the elites. But those fees enable the elites to have schooling options that are distinctive from the schools for the lower-middle classes and the poor. Literally, the elites can buy education for their children.

Policy, like the spider's web, is a messy business when confronted in practice. Schools have to justify their exclusiveness, and every now and again there is a public scandal around admissions policy, such as the headline 'Springfield Convent school in Wynberg denies racist admission policy' (Mlamla 2019), or when parents at Ravenswood Girls' Junior School charged

the elite school with 'ongoing exclusionary tactics with regard to admission of students' (Pather 2018). Both of these schools are among the most elite and 'whitest' of the Southern Suburbs schools, and in these cases they faced a crisis; the explanations for their white-dominant status would fall apart under such direct criticism by parents from within the school. The veneer of equity was being challenged in these schools, where in one of them 'even the isiXhosa teacher is a white woman' (Mlamla 2019).

Policy always represents the interests of the powerful and, as in the case of these two suburban schools, whose combined age is more than 270 years, complaints from the margins seldom bring change. Policy is never neutral or merely technical; it encapsulates the values and vision of those with power. It reinforces the status of the privileged, even as it frustrates the advances of the less privileged. Even when a policy appears to be neutral—'anyone can apply'—its execution ensures that only a few get in, while most are left out.

This raises the question of why a school would go to great lengths to present its admissions policy as open, transparent and fair. This is because not all policies are meant to be implemented. Policies often contain a symbolic function that has little to do with practice. A policy can project inclusion regardless of its exclusionary effects. It therefore serves the interests of the elite institutions to position themselves as open, transparent, democratic, inclusive and even progressive. This is true of social policy, education policy and, in this specific case, the admissions policy of a school.

In South Africa there are many examples of the symbolic functions of policy in education. The sudden and emphatic policy concerns about South Africa's alignment with the Fourth Industrial Revolution led President Cyril Ramaphosa to declare the following in his 2019 State of the Nation Address:

> *Over the next six years, we will provide every school child in South Africa with digital workbooks and textbooks on a tablet device …*
>
> *… we are expanding the training of both educators and students to respond to emerging technologies including the Internet of things, robotics and artificial intelligence.*
>
> *Several new technology subjects and specialisations will be introduced, including technical mathematics and technical sciences, maritime sciences, aviation studies, mining sciences and aquaponics.* (Ramaphosa 2019)

The symbolism is powerful, for it connects South African education with modernity and it signals—through grand commitments to innovation, technology and change—that the school system will not be left behind those of advanced nations. But it is not cynical to suggest, in one of the poorest-performing and unequal school systems in the world (Spaull & Jansen 2019)—where almost eight out of 10 children cannot read for understanding, and where children occasionally drown in pit latrines—that such grand ideas need to take stock of some unpleasant realities. And yet the schools that will benefit the most from such planned advances in technology and innovation are those already well equipped with teachers and facilities, so they will once again march ahead of the majority of schools struggling with dysfunction and failing infrastructure.

It is this concern about symbolic policy that has led scholars to think about policy as 'that which actually happens' at the ground level rather than what is pronounced at the official levels. Others have argued that this implies studying the effects of policy through backward mapping—that is, from studying what happens inside a school and then tracing backwards to the original intentions. In short, the policy is the practice, not the formal document sitting on the principal's desk. This insight, therefore, makes short shrift of the fidelity perspective in policy, where the goal is to check that the policy as stated is faithfully executed as the policy in practice. Practice is never a mirror image of policy, and this has implications for this study of admissions. It means that rather than looking at what schools say their policies are, it is better to determine what happens in the admissions process, and what the results are for the final enrolment demographics of a school. In other words, what are the enrolment outcomes (practice) and how did they come about, going back to the original goals as expressed in formal school policy?

To claim, however, that policy belongs to, and is framed by, the powerful does not mean that the elites always have their way, so to speak. The end of apartheid, many argue, was in large part a result of the historic student protests of 1976 for equal education, which caused successive tsunamis of protests from workers, parents and the liberation movements, as well as international actors, that eventually led to the new democracy of 1994 and, of course, the opening up of schools to all children. How does this play out in admissions policy?

Halfway into this study we found that in some schools the policies were challenged and even changed as a result of activist parents—white and black—who demanded that they be opened up further, given the low numbers of black students. There will be more on this in Chapter 8, but the general point is that policy, though still an instrument of the powerful, does from time to time face resistance that demands the review and change of set policy. Of course, resistance against the powerful can often be accommodated and absorbed, in which case the status quo continues after minor changes have been made. This is in effect the power of the spider's web metaphor—its tensile strength can adapt to forceful winds and yet retain its structure and shape going forward.

## Conclusion

The spider's web presented in this chapter demonstrates the power of South African schools in distributing unequal life chances to the children of the privileged and the poor. Schools do not exercise such power in a vacuum. Through legislation, schools are endowed with substantial authority to determine who gains and who loses in the high-stakes game of admissions. Through their admissions policies, schools have weaved together a web of instruments that secure their racial and class privilege in the post-apartheid era. There is little official sanction in the exercise of such consequential power, for reasons explained in Chapter 9. Any challenge and contestation of such power comes mainly from progressive parents inside the school; however, their numbers are usually too small and their influence too limited to fundamentally unsettle the resident power of the school authorities.

One of the most exclusionary policy instruments with which former white schools exercise power over admissions is the determination of residence—that is, whether the applicant family lives within 'the zone', or the area closest to the school. This, then, is the subject of the next chapter.

# CHAPTER 3

# 'Selection by Mortgage':[1] Feeder Zones and Unequal Access to Privileged Schools

*Zones are a con.*

—Principal of a Southern Suburbs school

## Introduction

Sometimes in the course of an interview there is a moment of candour and clarity that stuns the researcher seeking information on a sensitive subject. This is what happened in what was intended as a throwaway question to the principal and her team at a top co-educational school in Claremont. 'So, what would I need to know as a parent to be sure I could get my child into your school?' asked one of the interviewers. Without cushioning the response, the principal came to the point: 'You must be rich and buy a house near to the school.'

To understand the geography of Cape Town's elite schools, it is important to grasp the long reach of apartheid's spatial planning. As already indicated, the elite residences of metropolitan Cape Town have been owned by white South Africans for more than a century. While much of this land was once occupied by black South Africans, apartheid ensured, through the notorious Group Areas Act (No 41 of 1950), that prime real estate was reserved and developed for whites. Although a small number of wealthy black families have moved into these areas since the end of residential segregation, these prestige properties are still overwhelmingly white. One way to see the perpetuation of racial and class privilege in residential segregation is illustrated in Figure 3.1, which represents house sales in three areas (Newlands, Claremont and Rondebosch) where our sampled schools are located, over a six-month period. The sheer cost of housing—from more than R1 million to more than R10 million—makes these areas among the most expensive in the Southern Suburbs.

1 This handy phrase is borrowed from studies of comprehensive schools in the UK; see Noden et al. (1998, 235).

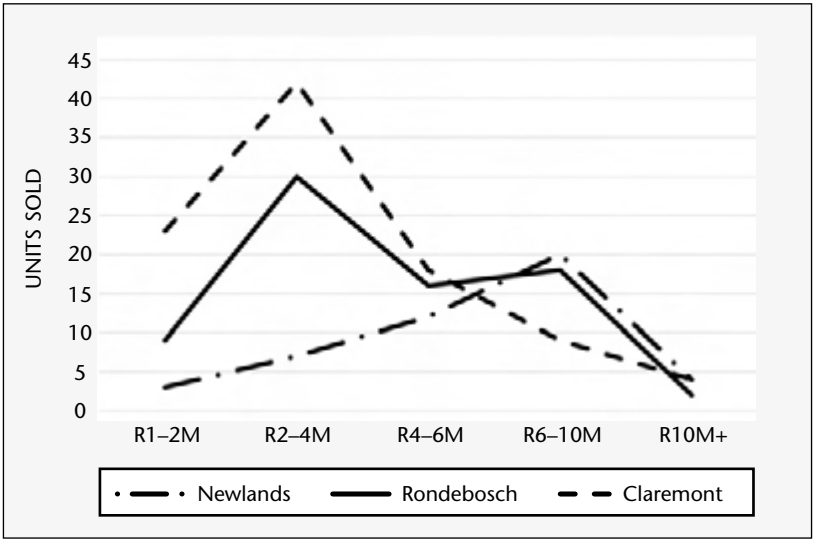


**Figure 3.1:** Property values and volumes of house sales in three areas in the Southern Suburbs over the period August 2018 to February 2019
*Source: Data provided by an estate agent in the Southern Suburbs*

Within easy reach, often walking distance, of any residence in these neighbourhoods is an elite school for the children of the wealthy property owners. Over time, strong bonds between the school communities and the residential communities have developed, and these have been reinforced by a policy instrument called feeder zones.

The admissions policy of a school revolves around the otherwise sensible idea that a child has the right to enrol in the school closest to home. This policy held firm under apartheid and has remained in place in the democratic era, and it explains in large measure the persistence of white schools in a black-majority country. The obvious dilemma after the end of apartheid was the tight relationship that had been established between schools and homes, such that there remain to this day clearly segregated neighbourhoods, still easily distinguished as white, coloured, Indian and African.

On the edges and outskirts of the predominantly white residential areas lie the mainly coloured areas of the Cape Flats. This too is a creation of apartheid. Many of these coloured townships on the bleak and windy Flats were designed for people forcefully evicted from areas declared to be white

under apartheid. Colourless, crowded flatland areas of Cape Town, with names such as Mitchells Plain, Manenberg, Bonteheuwel and Bridgetown, are easily recognised as 'coloured'. These are the areas where mainly working-class coloured families reside and where gangsterism, unemployment and drugs have come to define the communities.

Among the coloured areas, however, there is also a class structure, so that, for example, Rondebosch East (a mainly coloured middle-class area) borders on Rondebosch (a former white area), creating all kinds of pressures on adjacent white schools. It is the middle-class coloured people who make the strongest claim on access to the former white schools in the suburbs and, in particular, on the more elite schools among them.

To understand this phenomenon, it is again necessary to examine the social history of the province in this southern part of the country, where people classified as coloured were concentrated, and their place and identity reinforced by racist laws that declared the Western Cape a 'Coloured Labour Preference Area' (Goldin 1987). What this meant was that black Africans, including those whose families had resided in the Cape for centuries, were for the most part regarded as strangers who belonged in one or more of the ethnic homelands of the Eastern Cape. These largely isiXhosa-speaking citizens were harassed daily through the hated pass book system that attempted to control the 'influx' of Africans into the Cape. The forced removals of Africans from informal settlements remained for decades the policy of successive National Party governments. The smaller number of 'urban Africans' were located in older and more established townships such as Langa, Gugulethu and Nyanga.

Geographically, what the spatial planning of apartheid achieved was that the black African townships were even farther removed from the (then) white schools of the Southern Suburbs. Economically, apartheid discrimination ensured that the African townships were more disadvantaged socially and economically than, for example, the middle-class coloured communities. Educationally, the differential funding of schools, which offered the least per capita spending on African children, meant that the township schools were the worst off in terms of resources and results. Psychologically, the demarcation of areas by race and class under apartheid led to more status and prestige being apportioned to one area and less to the next, regardless of objective conditions, such as the quality of housing or schools. As one Claremont parent put it, 'I step over this road and the housing prices jump

by R2–3 million', even though there is no visible difference in size or quality between the housing on the more coloured side and the more white side of the road.

This hierarchy of residential areas and schools is reflected perfectly in the demand for school placement in the Southern Suburbs of Cape Town. African children from the townships by and large seek admission to the more middle-class coloured schools, while middle-class coloured students seek admission to the more privileged white schools. This pattern remains undisturbed more than two decades after the end of apartheid, with one major difference—what determines migration to particular categories of coloured or white schools is largely the class status of the applicant. Poor and working-class coloured families remain stuck in former coloured schools because they cannot afford to pay the higher fees of even the lower end of the former white schools. Those who can afford to pay often make great sacrifices to send their children to the more affordable of the former white schools, as will be shown in greater detail in later chapters; in such cases, parents typically take advantage of the fee-exemption status offered to families who cannot afford the fees.

Similarly, African children from the poorest township schools seek access to any of the more established coloured schools, especially where those schools are either physically proximate to or lie along a major public transport route. The same is true in the case of application to former white schools that are accessible by public transport and also more affordable. It is these former white schools that, as we will show in Chapter 7, become black schools in a relatively short period of time, a process accelerated by white flight.

What all of this means is that the demography of the Western Cape (which is mainly coloured) and the geography of residential occupation have led to particular patterns of desegregation in the Southern Suburbs. White elite and stable middle-class schools, because of the feeder-zone policy, remain white by offering places to children who live nearby. Where black students are enrolled in these schools, they are mainly children from wealthy and middle-class coloured families, with only a sprinkling of African children. Where African students do access schools outside of the townships, it is mainly by attending coloured schools and lower-fee schools once reserved for whites. In all of these cases, where a child attends school is largely determined by their place of residence, and it is this that explains the dominant patterns of enrolment in the former white middle-class and elite schools.

## How the feeder zones work in practice

In the Western Cape province, the government policy on feeder zones appears to be simple enough: 'The WCED [Western Cape Education Department] has **not** determined any feeder zones for public schools in the Western Cape' (WCED 2010:5; emphasis in the original). Yet, that ostensibly simple statement covers a multitude of sins in post-apartheid South Africa, given that the relationship between race and residence has hardly shifted at all. What this official stance does allow, of course, is for schools to determine their own zones, and therefore who gets in and who is kept out.

This is how school-determined zones work in practice: the governing body approves a radius around the school from within which the management of the school selects its students. Given the distribution of race and residency, as has been shown, most of the elite and middle-class schools of the Southern Suburbs set that radius within the bounds of the white community—that is, where most white families reside. Using technology such as Google Maps, in many cases the school team, often led by the admissions secretary, works meticulously to ensure that those boundaries are honoured when it comes to selecting prospective students.

The most important thing we discovered about the feeder zones is the duplicity in its application. 'Zones are a con,' said the principal of one of the most elite schools, and with good reason. So, for example, the principal of a former white school insisted that his school used 'a Google Map quadrant thing and we go 1.5 km, 1.6 km, 1.7 km, and we take the children who are closest to the school and they are accepted.' The problem is that if radius was used as a geometrical measure, they would have to include the nearby African township that could so clearly be seen from the window behind his desk. One of the interviewers politely pointed this out to him. Quickly the principal corrected himself; he meant the part of the radius structure that captured the majority-white suburb on this side of the school. It would become clear in many interviews that the feeder zone is a handy tool with which to regulate the racial, and also class, composition of the school.

In the case of this particular primary school, a growing number of middle-class coloured families had moved into this predominantly white suburb. Pinelands is not super-wealthy like Constantia, for example, but it houses a stable middle-class community of mainly professional people, such as university academics, school teachers and small-business entrepreneurs. The houses are comparatively more affordable and prices fall between the

expensive suburbs, such as Upper Claremont, and the lower-end suburbs, such as Thornton. The schools and the residences are, in other words, comfortably middle class, and one way to maintain this status is through the powerful instrument of student selection called the feeder zone.

The zoning policy is deployed as a flexible management tool that a school can use to exclude, but also to include, according to its needs. For example, a white-dominant school decided that it needed more black students in one academic year, so it relaxed the zoning policy by one or two streets to bring in a few more coloured middle-class students, but not too many. In another year the same school tightened the zone, so to speak, since it had achieved the demographic spread that it wanted while maintaining a white majority.

### Feeder zones and companies on their doorstep

There is one threat to Pinelands' comfortable middle-class arrangement described above, namely that the insurance giant Old Mutual, which employs hundreds of professionals mainly from the coloured community, is located in the suburb. It would be the most sensible thing for the schools of Pinelands to give working mothers and fathers the opportunity to drop off and collect their children on their way to and from work every day. Indeed, if there was a crisis, such as a student falling ill, the parent would literally be only five minutes away. The problem is that, given the numbers of such mainly middle-class coloured families, the school would in a short period of time become, in effect, a 'non-white' school. And so, for at least one of the three former white Pinelands schools, the zoning policy applies strictly to parents who reside in the suburb and not those who merely work in the area.

Historically, the presence of a major employer in a community was often a critical factor in the establishment of a new school. Typically, a white school in the Southern Suburbs would be built to serve children of employees in a white company nearby. As will be shown in Chapter 7, when such employers, and especially in the case of public sector entities such as the local prisons, were forced to change their staff demographics after apartheid, these shifts had major implications for the racial demographics of school enrolments.

### When feeder zones become redundant

Feeder zones become redundant in three cases. In the elite middle-class schools with very high costs, the fee structure automatically excludes all but

wealthy parents from inside or outside the application zone. In such cases the school seeks any parent who can afford the fees. The fees are so high that these schools are desperate to attract and retain their enrolled students, since even a small loss of students could have large implications for the ability to maintain staffing levels. Zones in such cases would be an unnecessary obstacle in the life of an elite school. Put differently, the fees effectively do what the zones would do elsewhere, and that is to exclude.

In the fragile middle-class schools zoning is also irrelevant, because white flight has in effect taken away the need for zoning as a means of controlling enrolments by race. This set of former white schools has become mainly coloured by enrolment, with smaller numbers of African children. The departure of white students has, furthermore, made some of these schools vulnerable to declining enrolments and therefore to the loss of teachers; as a result, these schools, too, have needed to ease the feeder zone requirement so as to ensure that children from anywhere can make up the numbers and keep the school viable from a state funding point of view.

A somewhat unique case of when zoning becomes redundant is that of special schools that offer highly specialised services to children with mild to severe disabilities, such as McKinley Primary School, where the fees and overall costs might run in excess of R100 000. Here, too, the schools are mainly white because of the fees, and the numbers of enrolled students are even more sensitive from a financial point of view, because the teacher-to-student ratio has to be low. In these cases zoning becomes irrelevant, given the special nature of the institution, the self-selecting character of the students and the high costs of tuition and care.

## Zoning policies in the stable middle-class schools

In the case of the stable middle-class schools with high but more reasonable fees (around R20 000 to R40 000), the zoning policy is more tightly applied. These are schools that more middle-class coloured and African families can access and that middle-class white families who are not wealthy continue to need as places of enrolment for their children. This is where the competition for schools is fiercest, since the fees are steep but still affordable and the quality of education is solid. These are also 'brand schools', which means that attending Gunter Primary School, Wynberg Girls' Junior School or Gosling Girls' Primary School, for example, ensures a more or less smooth passage to a good high school and the elite University of Cape Town (UCT).

By dint of these balancing forces—affordability and quality in the brand school market—these are also the schools where the richest diversity of enrolments can be found, even if, as in the case of the elite schools, they also struggle with transforming the teaching body. Unsurprisingly, these are the schools where the most intense struggles for transformation occur, in part because of the visible numbers of educated, middle-class black parents who, along with progressive white parents, are able to make the case for change, as with various groupings of 'concerned parents' in the Southern Suburbs schools.

Given the racial and class mix of parents, these are also the schools where an internal tussle over a transformation issue (such as the hair requirements for girls at Sans Souci Girls' High School or the alleged firing of the only black teacher at Ravenswood Girls' Junior School) becomes an embarrassing public controversy in the media.

## Mixed and flexible zoning

### The dilemma of mixed zones

As the suburbs change, zones take on greater complexity, with direct implications for schools. This is clearly the case in those suburbs bordering areas where new developments, such as affordable flats, are built, bringing a non-traditional clientele within walking distance of a former white school. One such suburb is Kenilworth, which sits just off Main Road between the darkening and more affordable white suburb of Wynberg to the south and the expensive and predominantly white suburb of Claremont to the north.

Here, a set of affordable flats was built just alongside the nearby railway line. The new tenants included middle-class black families and, especially, citizens from other African countries, who also tend to live around Wynberg Main Road. Kenilworth is in fact a 'mixed zone', and it is completely foreseeable that in a short period of time a nearby school such as Gosling Girls' Primary School will become majority black. In this case, the developments in a neighbourhood change the enrolments of a school sitting on the border between suburbs marked by wealthy and affordable homes.

Zones, we found, are neither static nor homogenous in any one residential area. A lower-middle-class area once built for servicemen returning from war, such as Bergvliet, can gradually become a more stable middle-class environment as older people are replaced with young white middle-class couples. But the suburb is also large enough that one part consists of more

expensive housing located closer to a more affluent school—such as Sierra Primary School—while another part has relatively cheaper housing and is closer to coloured suburbs such as Heathfield, which is nearer to Bayside Primary School. In other words, the concept of a feeder zone is marked by class stratifications even within a single former white suburb of Cape Town.

Mixed zones stand in stark contrast to schools with fixed, homogenous zones, such as the stable middle-class girls' school where, according to its leaders, 'our geography remains quite static.' Given the press for transformation, the zoning policy explains 'the tap dance we do at the moment' to change the institution, acknowledged the school leaders. Such a school, with its high but reasonable school fees, is in heavy demand. Litigation is commonplace. Parents use fictitious addresses suggesting residence within the zone. These school leaders are very conscious of the whiteness of their school and find themselves 'play[ing] off transformation against zoning'.

## The political dilemma of flexible zoning

Schools, as we have seen, can use zones to cut off access to certain communities, but also to open admissions to those living outside the immediate neighbourhood. A school might feel it has too few coloured students and then relax the outside perimeters of the zone to let in some students who qualify on other grounds, such as the ability to pay the fees or pass the admissions test. Because of the dearth of black African students in most of the Southern Suburbs schools, some principals will not apply the zoning rule if it allows for a qualifying student of that description to access the school. It must be emphasised, though, that this applies to a small number of individual students, so there is no threat to the school of being 'overrun' by non-white students. What the few African students allow the school to do, however, is to make the public claim that it has such students in the student body and therefore that it does not exclude on the basis of race, or that it is not racist.

This rule also applies to choosing boys versus girls. Several principals of the Southern Suburbs reported that they might call a neighbouring school and say, 'I am short of an African girl' or 'I need more coloured boys', and in this way they would send the parents in one or the other direction in order to maintain some sort of balance or diversity in an incoming class. Once again, the zone is ignored in favour of an immediate goal but, as before, this applies to a discrete number of individual students.

When schools make such adjustments outside of the published admissions criteria, they inevitably expose themselves to parental pressure. The word gets out. A parent whose child has been denied admission would rightly claim that their neighbour's child also lives outside of the school's feeder zone but was granted admission. Parents might even go to the provincial education department to pursue their case. Some schools have an escape clause in the admissions policy—the admission of a student is in the final analysis left to the discretion of the principal. Others buy time by promising entry onto a waiting list in the event any child in the right grade drops out. Or the school simply stands its ground until the parent goes away. Regardless, relaxing the zone restrictions for some children places the school in a political predicament.

### When zoning is neutralised by other admissions policies

It is not only high school fees that make zoning redundant, as in the case of most elite schools. For example, if a child is enrolled at a school while the parents live in the feeder zone but they then subsequently move, the school might automatically allow a second or third child from the same family to enrol on the grounds of the admissions policy that specifies that a sibling can be admitted under any conditions.

Sometimes, however, there are very real practical difficulties that make the application of zoning unnecessary. For example, the 'whitest' primary school in this study is an Afrikaans school, so black students or Afrikaans-speaking coloured parents who prefer English schools for their children are automatically excluded. This particular school is also located at a considerable distance from where the Cape Town railway line ends, so it is unlikely that a small child from a working-class family attending this primary school would be able to take the long walk from the train station to the school.

In rare cases, a school's policy of enabling diversity means that it ignores even those white families living within the feeder zone, so as to enable the admission of black students to an otherwise all-white or nearly all-white entering class of Grade 1 or reception-year students. As one principal put it, 'If there is not enough transformation we then look further and we exclude people who live on the doorstep of the school to work towards that.' Such an action often draws heavy criticism from white families who believe that they are being denied access in violation of a familiar rule—proximity to the school. Other families understand and reluctantly accept the progressive ruling and find space for their children at nearby schools of choice.

## Can zoning flexibility advance transformation?

There is no evidence from this study of 30 primary schools that flexible zoning in itself transforms former white schools into richly diverse school communities, for the following reasons. As demonstrated, zoning flexibility, where it is applied, is done with individual students in mind and managed in such a way that the dominant demographic of the elite and stable middle-class schools remains majority white.

In addition, the zoning policy is but one thread in a spider's web of other policies that, whether intended or not, keep the schools predominantly white (see Chapter 2). Zoning, then, might not always be the most important policy instrument in determining who gets in. One prominent girls' school, for example, has no zoning policy and considers diversity a fourth consideration, after Catholic identity, siblings at the school and heritage status. Two Afrikaans schools need no zoning because the language policy includes some black students but excludes most. A sought-after boys' school puts siblings first and zoning third as criteria for selection.

It is also how the zoning policy is applied that makes the achievement of transformation difficult. One of the three 'whitest' schools (by enrolment) in the study has a complex numbering system that only local residents are likely to know about. Parents have to join a queue, and the first ones in are awarded numbers that fill up the entering class on a first come, first served basis. This numbering system is not widely known in a selection system that generally honours 'the closest school by road' principle. The night before enrolment day, parents join the line, order takeaways or bring their *braaiskottels* (barbecues), and enjoy the communion of friends until the school gates open the next morning. Here another factor becomes critical in deciding who gets in: knowledge of the school. And in this regard an important player in the drama of admissions is a third party—the estate agent.

## Estate agents as zoning officials

The first thing an estate agent will tell you is that the ethical code of the profession does not allow them to steer prospective buyers to particular houses in order to live within the catchment area of a preferred school. In the course of a lengthy interview, however, the estate agent we spoke to dropped her guard, and it soon became evident how powerful estate agents are in directing clients towards particular schools.

It should be noted at the outset that the profession of estate agents is among the most racially divided in South Africa, and there is ample evidence of racial prejudice in their midst. The first white person in South Africa's post-apartheid democracy to go to prison for *crimen injuria*—for making obscenely racist comments about black people on beaches—was an estate agent. And the frequency of reports of racial incidents perpetrated by estate agents led the Estate Agencies Affairs Board 'to institute appropriate strategies and programmes aimed at eliminating the scourge of racism from within the estate agency sector' (PPI 2016).

During interviews for this research, a pattern emerged revealing that coloured estate agents worked mostly in coloured areas and white estate agents mostly in white areas. Coloured estate agents talked freely about the difficulty of being selected by agencies to sell the more expensive houses—which would mean larger incomes—in the white areas of the Southern Suburbs. This is not surprising, given research elsewhere showing 'that the clustering of agents in and around certain neighborhoods correlates positively with house prices' and that there is 'a significant relationship between agent concentration and racial segregation' (Besbris & Faber 2017:850). A husband-and-wife team of coloured estate agents recalls: 'We were doing everything that the other [white] agents were doing, even better, but we can't sell in Constantia or Bishopscourt. You have to do so much extra to prove yourself as being good enough to sell. They would rather take a [white] intern.' The racist attitudes of this estate agency is not without logic; their white clients might feel uncomfortable and question the knowledge and competence of black agents.

How do estate agents in fact guide clients towards desirable schools? The most obvious method is through open advertisements, as in this online post by a prominent estate agency in the Southern Suburbs:

> *The Sweet Valley catchment area remains a sought after area of the Cape Town Southern Suburbs, partly because families want their children to attend Sweet Valley Primary School or Bergvliet High School, which enjoy excellent reputations. The immediate catchment area is defined as the area where Sweet Valley Primary School is the nearest state English primary school to the home.* (Myproperty 2013)

The relationship between the estate agency and the elite school is symbiotic in nature. On the one hand, the agency seeks out wealthy buyers attracted by the excellent schools in the area, while the school selects well-heeled residents who can pay the high fees and afford to live in the area. This symbiotic relationship *benefits* both parties—the school and the estate agency. While the school benefits from wealthy parents who can maintain and extend the reputation of the school through the accumulation of parental resources, the housing prices are upheld by the prestige of the school. One major study in fact found that schools rated as prestigious in their performance translate into higher housing values (Unger 2013).

Estate agents themselves are not immune to selection discrimination by elite schools, as two parents who are estate agents from the coloured area of Grassy Park recall:

> *When we entered the school and we asked for the application we were told that it will not be successful. So we asked, based on what? Because we had not even applied yet. 'No, you need to be in the catchment area,' she said, not knowing where we're living. They didn't even know where we lived. They didn't ask us where we lived; they just said you need to live in the area in order to get into the school.*

This response effectively turned these two estate agent parents away from further interest in the school because, as one reasoned, '[i]f that's [the attitude] from the start, from the "admin" person that's meeting us for the first time, how's it going to be when the child goes to the school? What are they going to be subjected to? And it really just threw me off …'

A white estate agent that we interviewed initially insisted that she did not direct parents seeking advice to particular schools, but she conceded that 'I believe [that] estate agents do locate areas of a suburb' that are preferred above others. This was the case where she worked, in the stable middle-class suburb of Pinelands. There is an older area that was once called 'Champagne Pinelands', an elite area with 'big double stories … overlooking the golf course'. Over time, however, the white school in this area of Pinelands turned black, in part because of its proximity to public transport routes and nearby working-class coloured areas. The same estate agent confessed: 'You know, I have to do it because the other agents do it. You know, I've got to say that it's in older Pinelands. I don't think I've ever advertised a home that [was] close to the [undesirable] school.'

Parents want to know where the good schools are before they purchase a house. 'Status is unbelievably important to parents coming into an area when they choose a school,' says an experienced estate agent. These clients look for signs of the prestige of a school, which is more important than content or what the school has to offer, she continues. And a critical factor in the assumed prestige of a school is its dominant racial mix. Schools know that, says a white Afrikaans-speaking estate agent, and manage the balance carefully:

> *I firmly believe that there are school committees who look at the profile of the school and say we need X number of coloureds, X number of black children, while we stay a predominantly white school. It is dangerous what I am now saying but I believe it happens. I see it with the white buyers coming in; the non-white buyers are extremely few, and why?*

Where do parents get this information about the prestige of a school? Yet another husband-and-wife pair of estate agents believes these parents come to the Southern Suburbs already armed with an opinion about the schools from their friends. Friends tell them about the school's reputation, the activities they offer, the sporting events and the space available at the school.

These estate agents, like their competitors, claim only to give lists of schools, rather than naming specific schools, to these informed parents; they talk about where they sent their own children; they are alert to clients who want co-educational versus single-sex schools for their children, and parents who are on the lookout for non-conventional schools for their creative, arts-orientated children versus others who want the stricter mathematics and science schools. And yet, even for these estate agents, the prejudice comes through as the interview progresses:

> *You say whites [dominate] in the Southern Suburbs, but we've got a lot of Indian and Muslim culture. It's heavy at the moment. They're basically taking over the Southern Suburbs and Rondebosch. And I'm using the Muslim community because it's probably more Muslim than Indian, although there's a lot of movement to the Western Cape of Indians. You're finding that the Muslim community has crept, say, from Rondebosch East [and] they've now taken over a lot of the Golden Mile [area].*

The prejudice of some of the estate agents interviewed points clearly to a predisposition toward white clients and the more prestigious schools and an antipathy toward outsider groups, such as, in this case, Muslim clients and parents. Despite an initial and routine citation of ethical constraints on the practice of 'steering'[2] parents towards particular schools, these interviews reveal both subtle, indirect ways of prompting clients towards particular schools and sometimes outright direction-giving in favour of better schools, which invariably means the predominantly white schools.

Studies elsewhere have found that among estate agents 'discussing school quality was becoming a proxy for discussing the racial or ethnic composition of a neighbourhood' (Zub 2016). In these ways, estate agents reinforce the zoning arrangements governing school admissions in the Southern Suburbs. But what if the school itself is not easily found or known, regardless of the zone in which it is located?

## Zones and knowledge of the school

The zone in which a school is located is primarily known to the school and its leadership. Not only is such knowledge held by a select few, as already indicated, it also changes from one year to the next as the goals of a particular school change. Knowing whether one lives 'in the zone' is critical knowledge, but most parents do not have access to this information until they come face to face with the school authorities. Nor do they necessarily know the ad-hoc exceptions to the rule, such as the search for African children or coloured boys, for example, outside the zone, depending of course on the school in question.

Sometimes the school itself is unknown to parents, given its concealed location within a suburb. For example, Gosling Girls' School, in Kenilworth, is located deep within that leafy suburb and is invisible from Main Road; the only people who know exactly how to access the school are those who live in the immediate neighbourhood, the families whose children attend the school or adults who work at the school. Similarly, Mulberry Girls' School, in Rondebosch, blends perfectly into the architectural style of the surrounding neighbourhood and does not appear to reflect the typical design

2 Steering is defined in studies on real estate agencies as 'a process that influences a potential buyer's choice of communities or neighborhood on the basis of race, color, religion, gender, disability, familial status or national origins' (Zub 2016).

of school buildings. Outsiders who come to know about these schools get the information by word of mouth, say school leaders.

A simple advance in technology has changed this seclusion, and that is the internet. Parents can now use a navigation application such as Google Maps to find the school while driving. Those on the internet can search for 'best schools in Rondebosch' and create a list of potential institutions to approach. But even such knowledge is unevenly distributed by race and class among parents, so that poorer families might simply not know where the schools are located, let alone what the invisible borders of the zoning area might be at any given time.

Knowledge of the school also means, for instance, knowing that the school only accepts online applications, as the WCED is piloting a strictly online system in selected schools; that certain kinds of documentation must be uploaded; or that an incomplete application will be rejected. What is assumed knowledge in the middle classes is taken for granted by the schools receiving applications, but such knowledge, including opening and closing dates for new applications, is often beyond the grasp of those living outside the zones, which, as we have seen, themselves reflect borders of race and class in the Southern Suburbs of Cape Town.

Of course, such knowledge of the school extends far beyond zoning. The black marketing head of a prestigious boys' school in the Southern Suburbs put it bluntly: 'It is not yet in the culture of blacks to know that you apply the day your child is born, knowledge that the old boys [would] have passed on. Or the fact that we give access to old boys and siblings.'

Zones, nevertheless, can be seen not only as the visible borders demarcating the area within which a legitimate application will be received; they also serve as powerful markers of exclusion to those who cannot afford to live within the residential area and to pay the high fees of the desired school. Also called a catchment area, the zone quite literally catches some students while others slip through the net of opportunity because of who they are and what they can or cannot purchase. And what makes access even more difficult than the financial or residential hurdles is simply the requisite knowledge of the school, its location and procedures.

## Zoning in: The rental option

As has been demonstrated, the housing options inside the former white areas of the Southern Suburbs are very expensive. It is therefore impossible for most

parents to simply purchase a house inside the feeder zone of the desired school and thereby almost guarantee admission for their child. There is, however, the rental option, especially in areas where flat accommodation has been built within the zone and where the owners allow for leasing arrangements.

However, not all schools allow for a rental option. Many of the elite schools require documentation proving ownership of a property in the feeder zone. In these cases only the wealthy are able to purchase a house and therefore also a seat in the nearby school. Such a stipulation is draconian as a measure of exclusion, for the simple reason that those with money get in and those without money are effectively barred from competing for access. In desperation, some parents forge documentation, but schools have found ways of validating suspect documents and suspect parents.

Some of the less affluent, but also some high-fee schools, occasionally allow parents who lease properties in the feeder zone to be eligible for the admission of their children. This opens up opportunities for those who can afford to lease a flat within a certain price range. In the Southern Suburbs, the price of a flat could range from that of an expensive house to something much more affordable for an average middle-class family.

Here another complication arises. Not all parents can afford to live in and pay the monthly rental on a leased property, so they sublease it to someone who can. The payoff, of course, is that the parents now have lease agreements and utility bills with the desired address and can approach the school for admission as if they actually lived within the zone. It is a complex scheme, but one that demonstrates again the lengths to which desperate parents go to enable their child to attend a good school.

Schools, however, can be relentless in checking and re-checking an address. An elite girls' school talks about 'interrogation' of parents and even children. The simplest thing to do is to ask the child where they live and specifically what their address is: 'The interrogation process regarding where people live is important. It's quite a critical process and it takes hours and hours of work. Because the fact is, people will use fictitious addresses.' The same school struggles with the new flats in the area:

> *There's lots of apartment blocks around here. So how do you then decide? They might say, 'Well, you know, I own an apartment just down the road, that's my closest school. It might be a two-bedroom and we don't live in it, but it is my property; my name is on the deed.'*

For the school leader quoted, the truth can be established in different ways, such as through personal knowledge: 'I know that they don't live there; they live next door to me in Pinelands. So they might own property there, but they don't live there. It's a single-room flat [but] we do check that out; we check on the integrity.' But it is also possible to know from word of mouth: 'The community will tell me where you live.' Often the direct route works best, though: 'More often than not when you ask them a direct question, it is difficult to be dishonest about it.'

It is not, however, only struggling parents who use the flat-rental option to access schools. One wealthy set of parents lived in an upmarket suburb but outside the zone of their preferred school, as the leader of a reputable Rondebosch school recalls: 'One of our parents bought a flat here in Devonshire and it was a bona fide case. They bought the flat; they owned the property. They actually lived there, we even did check that. But the moment they're in the school, they move.'

## Conclusion

This chapter provided one of the first empirical accounts of the close relationship between residential segregation and school segregation in South Africa—a phenomenon well described in literature on the USA (Bhargava 2017; Frankenberg 2013). It is a symbiotic relationship in that expensive white-dominant neighbourhoods attract wealthy white parents who can afford both the homes and the schools. At the same time, well-off parents provide the private resources that enable and extend the privileged status of the schools, which in turn makes the neighbourhood attractive to wealthy families.

The converse is also true. Black African and coloured neighbourhoods serve poorer communities, which in turn are surrounded by poorer schools. Sandwiched between the privileged white neighbourhoods with their schools and the poor black communities with their schools is a small but growing black middle class that seeks access to the former white public and private schools. One way they can do this is to purchase homes in former white areas; this remains limited to a relatively small number of black families, except in cases where a once-white community turns black.

Nonetheless, in the post-apartheid era the simplest way to access a privileged majority-white school is to buy a home in a privileged majority-white neighbourhood. It is still a case of 'selection by mortgage' when it comes to children being able to access the education available from a top South African school. However, being close the school is not enough; it is also about having the resources to pay the exorbitant school fees. This is the subject of the next chapter.

# CHAPTER 4

## School Fees—And the Stories They Tell

*White seems to be better because they charge a little bit more fees.*
— A white teacher

### Introduction

Japie Fredericks worked as a housepainter in the Southern Suburbs, and by the time his daughter Jolene started in junior primary (Foundation Phase) he had already set his sights on a particularly well-appointed Catholic school for her. A devout Catholic, Japie had hoped that the faith card would help get him over the admissions line, because the race card mattered little in these competitive schools in the suburbs. Then there was the hurdle of the school fees, set at well over R60 000; that hurdle was going to be tough to scale, but he would take on even more jobs, work weekends and even give up his DStv, the extra television package you could buy to get the sports channels.

So, Japie worked harder than usual to raise the application fee of more than R12 000. He did not realise that the fee was non-refundable, but this was a gamble he would have taken anyway for, after all, unlike the wealthy parents, he had no intention of applying to other schools 'just in case' his daughter did not get in. Then, to his family's absolute delight, Jolene was accepted, and instantly Japie saw his whole life change before his mind's eye—the girl would get a good education, go to the University of Cape Town (UCT) (all the girls from this school seemed to) and make money for the family from a good job.

With Jolene enrolled, the next task was to keep up with the payments. After a few months, Japie fell behind; business was tough, and homeowners were not so eager to spend money on having their houses painted. At first, the school sent polite letters ('You may have forgotten to pay so this is a gentle reminder that the first term fees were due last week …'), but then the correspondence became less pleasant, until eventually it sounded threatening ('If we do not receive payment by 30 April we will have no choice but to ask you to consider withdrawing your daughter'). Japie scrambled for more work, but without success. He took out a small bank loan, but it did not cover

the full outstanding amount. Worse, the next term's fees were already coming due. Eventually, Japie received the earth-shattering demand—remove your daughter. As Japie drove Jolene home after school that day, he carefully avoided eye contact with his daughter as tears rolled down his cheeks. How would he explain the school's decision to his daughter?[1]

## The harsh realities of exclusion by school fees

Every year tens of thousands of South African parents struggle to pay their school fees. This is true in the case of ordinary township schools as well as some of the more middle-class schools in the country. It is the case in public as well as in private schools, in rural but also urban schools. Nobody is spared, except students in schools who enrol the 'poorest of the poor' and whose families are exempt from paying fees. Everybody else pays. However, a family at a fee-paying school can apply for fee exemption from the provincial department of education and, if they qualify, the school receives a calculated amount to pay for that child.

When the economy is in a downturn, more and more parents struggle to pay. The circumstances of parents change, such as when a small company has to lay off workers, or a small business entrepreneur is forced to close operations because of non-payments from clients, or the breadwinner of the family is boarded for a debilitating illness. Once an additional child reaches school age, the burden of payment for a struggling family becomes even greater.

When this happens, the effects are often bidirectional, especially for the middle-class schools—the family struggles to pay and the school struggles to maintain its offerings. In the private schools, the parent in arrears is generally required to withdraw the child, the argument being that school fees are the school's main source of revenue, since government pays nothing towards the school's costs. Even though some private schools might in exceptional cases 'make a plan' to keep a poor student, and the odd one might have a scholarship fund to support 'needy students', private schools are highly sensitive to changes in student numbers. For example, where fees are in excess of R100 000 per student, even the departure of one or two children would affect the ability to hire additional teachers for, say, drama and arts, or assistant teachers in each classroom.

1 This is a fictional story composed from several anecdotes about struggling families shared during the course of this investigation.

In the case of the stable middle-class schools, parents may encounter either the rigid fee collection policy of a private school or the more reasonable fees of a public school. Near to Castle Primary School, for example, is a private religious school called Islamia (where the 2019 fees for the primary grades ranged from R29 500 to R38 500), which some Muslim parents see as a preferred school. However, as Castle Primary's principal observed, '[Islamia's] fees are quite high, [and] some parents try to go there because they think it's the best option, but then they realise that they are quite strict with fees. Here, on the other hand, if you explain your situation, we understand; at the other school there is zero understanding.'

In the middle-class public schools, there is nevertheless a more or less aggressive debt collection strategy, but eventually a percentage of the total fees is written off as bad debt while the student remains enrolled. A school's management would pride itself on being able to collect most of the fees due in a particular academic year. Provided a majority of the parents pay, a school can add more teachers paid by the governing body, make vital extensions to the library, update the computer software, and so on. Few public schools dismiss non-paying students, because the provincial department of education takes a dim view of putting children on the streets. Even tactics such as preventing a high school student from attending the matric farewell party will invoke a sharp response from the provincial education authorities.

That is why schools invest considerable time in selecting the right student, or rather the right family, from the outset, based on a judgement about their ability to pay (see Chapter 6 on social selection). This study found that the stable middle-class schools are so adept at selecting 'the right student' from a class perspective that very few struggle with outstanding fees.

## The policy context of school fees

Before South Africa became a democracy in 1994, public education was free, at least in the sense that the state took care of teacher salaries, building maintenance and the operations of a school. Where school fees were charged, they were modest for most of the ordinary public schools. Of course, education is never completely free, and so parents spent money on uniforms and packed lunch boxes and, from time to time, paid for an outing to an educational or sporting event.

In the early 1990s, leading up to the first democratic elections, the national department of education realised that creating a single authority for

schools with a more equitable funding regime than under apartheid would be impossible without large-scale 'rationalisation', as they called it. The race-based system that offered separately resourced education for white, Indian, coloured and African students (in that descending order of magnitude) meant that funding education at the level that whites had enjoyed for decades was simply unaffordable. With more than 90 per cent of the government's education budget being spent on personnel costs, a process of teacher rationalisation started, and this led to massive losses of teachers, especially of those paid through funds controlled by what was called the House of Representatives, the coloured chamber of the Tricameral Parliament. Under the rationalisation programme, teachers could take voluntarily severance packages, after which the LIFO ('last in, first out') principle applied (Vally & Tleane 2002).

It was also at this time that white public schools, still segregated and under the authority of the apartheid government, were offered four options as to how they wanted to integrate. Model A meant a school could function as a private school. Model B meant that the school would remain a normal state school (that is, entirely state-funded) and admit up to 50 per cent black students only. Model C meant that a school would qualify for state subsidies, raise the rest of its required funds through fees, and decide on whether to admit black students. Model D came later as a response to dwindling white enrolments in some schools and allowed for unlimited admission of black students. Most schools chose Model B initially, since it offered full state funding and allowed for a measure of integration. But this was costly for the state, and so in 1992, as part of the cutting back of funding, the government made all institutions follow the Model C option—a term that is still a handy reference when referring to the former white schools.

What is critical about the Model C option is that it set in place a school governance regime that continues to this day. It empowered school governing bodies (SGBs) with three significant rights: to determine admissions policy, to set their own fees and to decide the language policy of the school. Those arrangements would become set in stone as a result of the transitional negotiations (see Chapter 9), and in the more than 25 years since the end of apartheid, successive governments have not altered the authority of SGBs over admissions and fees. Furthermore, while there have been limited cases in which the admissions practices of a school were challenged in the courts, there has been no interference on the part of the provincial government, which is responsible for schools, with the fees charged at any public school (Wilter 2013).

In the celebrated Rivonia Primary School case, for example, the Constitutional Court ruled in October 2013 that '[t]he head of a provincial education department may in limited circumstances intervene in matters where a public school refuses admission of a student on the basis that the school is full' (Wilter 2013). At the same time, though, the Court held that '[m]inimum uniform norms and standards have not been issued and the majority of provinces do not have provincial laws that specifically empower the head of the provincial education department to intervene in such matters' (Wilter 2013). The possible reasons for official silence on fees are explored in Chapter 9.

What government policy has effected is the creation of 'no-fee schools' under a system called quintiles. Schools are divided into five categories: Quintile 1 consists of the poorest 20 per cent of schools, which receive the highest per-student allocation from government. Quintile 2 captures the next poorest 20 per cent of schools, and so on. Quintile 5 in this pyramid structure therefore represents the most affluent schools, which receive the lowest allocation per student from the government. In 2018, for example, the threshold allocation for quintiles 1–3 schools was R1 243 per student; for Quintile 4 schools it was R623 and for Quintile 5 schools R215 (NCOP 2017).

The major weakness of the quintiles system is that while it stipulates the maximum subsidy given by government, it does not determine the maximum fees levied by the schools. As a result, the inequalities between poorer schools in the lower quintiles and affluent schools in the upper quintiles have been increased massively through the private contributions of middle-class and wealthy parents. Rather than bringing some level of equality to school funding by offering a larger slice of government funding to poorer schools and less to the middle-class schools, the corrective ambitions of the policy have been cancelled out by the uncapped fees that the historically advantaged schools can secure from parents. Put bluntly, what poor schools receive from government is miniscule in relation to what privileged schools can raise through fees.

Which raises another question: Why doesn't the government set a cap on funding for the privileged schools? In theory, reducing private funding to the middle-class and elite schools would free up money for the vast majority of schools at the lower end of the public school system. However, government intervention to limit the volume of private (that is, parent) contributions to public schools carries the real threat of pushing these elite schools into the independent school system. Such a move would mean not only a loss

of control over the schools, but also a potential political crisis, given that the national school results, from the systemic tests in primary school to the senior certificate results in high school, would look much, much worse than when buoyed by the contributions of the former white schools.

The net result of this policy stalemate is that 'the rich get richer' in terms of school-fee policies and, with the advantage of running, in effect, quasi-private schools, SGBs also continue to enjoy authority over admissions policy which, as we show in this book, keeps many middle-class and elite schools predominantly white. Those are the policy arrangements affecting schools, but how do such policies on school fees play out in the lives of schools and their clients, the parents who pay?

## What fees tell us about the class structure of former white schools

All 30 primary schools in our sample are former white institutions. All of these schools were privileged under apartheid, at least as compared to black education. Yet, a striking feature of tuition costs among these former white schools is the sheer range of fees charged to parents, from R6 000 at one end to R64 000 in the middle to more than R100 000 at the upper end, as shown in Figure 4.1.

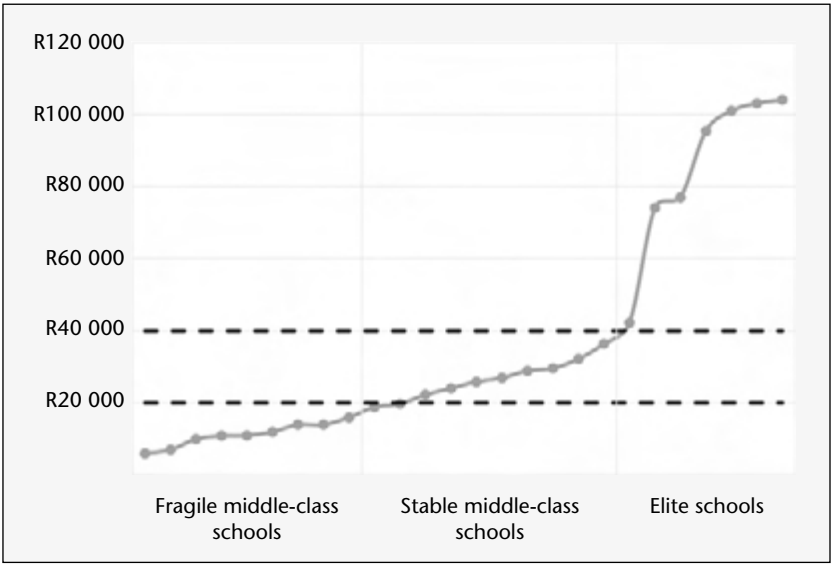


**Figure 4.1:** Mapping schools by three broad fee classes: Annual school fee distribution, 2019
*Source: School fee data directly provided by schools*

One interesting aspect of the fee structure is that it reveals a segment of white education that is seldom talked about—the reality of poor-white schooling even during the heyday of apartheid. In other words, poor-white education was not simply an experience of Boers in the aftermath of the South African War of 1899–1902, but a reality that shaped the lives of, admittedly, a small number of white citizens up to the end of apartheid.

Warrington Preparatory School, despite its aspirationally elite English name, was one such school. As its retiring principal recalls, 'It was a very poor school, an extremely poor school, I can remember. I was a student here and can remember the children getting milk and bread.' The entire area surrounding Warrington still consists of modest houses similar to what is found in the adjacent middle-class coloured areas. As a result, when apartheid ended, schools such as this quickly turned black, since the property prices were much more affordable than in wealthier suburbs such as Claremont and Constantia.

Nearby Southerns Primary School, although with higher fees than Warrington, once served 'low- to middle-income white families … not the very rich,' says the principal. When apartheid's Group Areas Act (No 41 of 1950) fell, these white families fled to the Northern Suburbs, the principal recalls, and 'we had a better-class group coming in from that time onwards than from when we had just the white community.' Although by no means an elite school like the ones in Rondebosch and Bishopscourt, Southerns became a more stable middle-class school because middle-class coloured people moved in as lower-income whites fled northwards. The 2019 fees at Southerns, as a result, were respectably middle class (R11 000), almost double that of its poorer cousin down the road, Warrington (R6 000).

This class structure reflected in the school fees is also found starkly among the three former white Afrikaans schools in the study sample. Laerskool Joos Adam, the elite majority-white Afrikaans school, charged fees of R25 922 in 2019, and the school was 93 per cent white. 'Many of our parents are relatively wealthy,' concedes the principal, 'lawyers, judges and a lot of medical doctors.' In one year, a teacher had a class of 24 children, of whom 17 had parents in legal careers. 'I could walk into the High Court,' notes the principal, 'and it would feel as if everyone there would know me because their children came through here.' Many of the Joos Adam parents, in fact, live in some of the wealthiest parts of upper Cape Town, such as Vredehoek, Tamboerskloof, Oranjezicht, Camps Bay and Clifton.

In the middle of the Southern Suburbs, by contrast, in a middle-class suburb, can be found the less affluent Laerskool Steph Stodel. It is a small school, also originally designed for Afrikaans-speaking children, but it finds itself in a predominantly non-Afrikaans language environment, so that in 2019 only 70.8 per cent of the children were white; the fees were R18 000. The parents are mainly lower middle class and unemployed, with some running their own fragile businesses. Some parents default on their payments, and both the school buildings and the grounds—compared to the more affluent Joos Adam—tell a story of neglect and decay.

Farther south lies the third Afrikaans school, Laerskool Pieter Voud, whose 2019 fees were a modest R16 000 ('R1 600 over 10 months,' emphasises the secretary over the telephone). Its enrolments were at 178 in 2019 (there were a mere 158 students in 2018), and it has seen an even greater decline in white Afrikaans students (at 56 per cent) than Steph Stodel. The school has only one class per grade and, even then, it has to actively recruit Afrikaans-speaking students from the nearby coloured townships. If the numbers keep declining, the school will lose teachers and then face the real possibility of closure. The white Afrikaans parents are not affluent, even though there are teachers and lawyers among them, along with many clerical workers, small-business owners and the unemployed. Once again, the school grounds look plain, even dilapidated in parts, and the tennis court's pale green surface speaks of neglect. The school has, however, built expansive vegetable gardens on its property, which serve as a much-needed source of revenue that keeps the school afloat.

It is not surprising, then, that there is a relationship between race and class reflected in the fee structure of a school. In fact, that relationship is so stark that it can be shown, in crude terms, that the higher the school fees, the 'whiter' the school, as demonstrated in Figure 4.2.

The straightforward explanation for this trend is that the fee structure reflects three broad class categories of schools in metropolitan Cape Town. The *elite schools* in the expensive suburbs are located in neighbourhoods where property prices are beyond the reach of almost all black parents except for the wealthy, such as senior executives in major corporate firms. The 2019 school fees range from R42 320, as at Rosenthal Boys' Preparatory School, a public school, to more than R100 000 at Richmond Primary School, which is private. These schools include public and private schools, as well as well-equipped schools for children with special learning needs. These schools are

distinguished by their impressive physical infrastructure, and the mountains of Cape Town provide a spectacular backdrop for many of them. These schools all have majority-white enrolments.

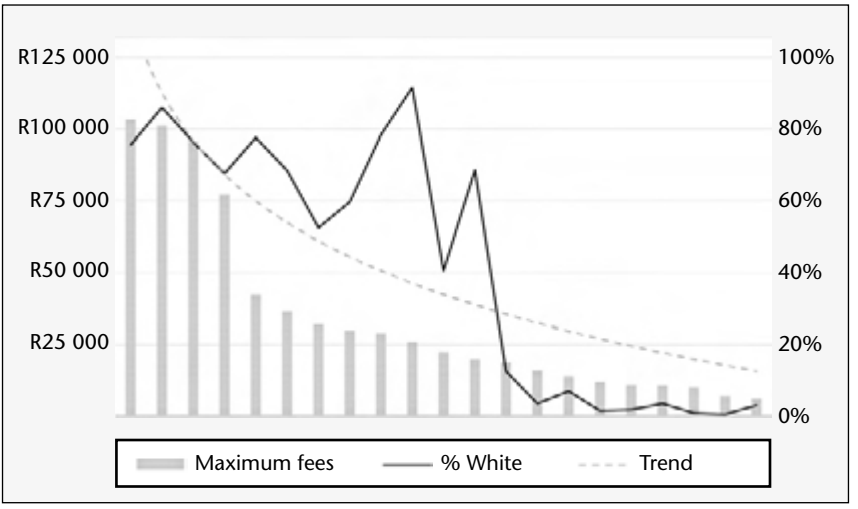


**Figure 4.2:** School fees vs 'whiteness' of primary schools, 2019
*Source: School data on fees and CEMIS data on enrolments*

The *stable middle-class schools* in the leafy suburbs are surrounded by nearby houses that are more affordable for a small but growing number of black professionals, such as teachers, accountants and the more senior government officials. The 2019 school fees range from around R19 000, as at Peakrest Primary School in Pinelands, to the upper end of R32 282, as at Gunter Primary School in Claremont. In these schools, small to large numbers of black students are enrolled, though always along with a significant number of white students. Some of these schools are centenarians (more than 100 years old) and are known for their solid academic reputation and the stability of their school leadership. For example, O'Ryan Girls' Primary School is not unique in having had only nine principals over the course of the 111 years of its existence.

The *fragile middle-class schools* are those in former white areas that are now mainly occupied by coloured, and in some cases African, residents. The parents are often clerical workers, small-business owners and those with entry-level government jobs who have to send their children to school

on public transport. Due to white flight from these areas, the schools have become emphatically coloured, with some African students, given the more affordable school fees, starting at R6 000 per annum in 2019, as in the case of Warrington Preparatory School. These schools are fragile because fee income is less reliable and much smaller in total than in the other two classes of schools. They generally have very few white students, if any at all, and their enrolments can fluctuate dramatically, as with the less affluent Afrikaans schools. In some cases, the infrastructure of these schools is run-down and poorly maintained, and at the other end of the scale not even the best of them can match such spectacular facilities as the two water polo pools at Shermer Primary School or the two AstroTurf hockey fields at Sierra Primary School, both public schools.

It is not, however, only the school fees that determine at which schools parents can afford to enrol their children. There are other, less visible costs associated with admission and enrolment that could break the proverbial camel's back for struggling parents.

## The hidden costs of a school's fees

The fee structure of a school tells another important story, and that is the hidden costs of attending many of the former white schools. For example, one of the most prestigious schools in the Southern Suburbs does not inform applicant parents of its exorbitant fees, with devastating consequences. It is unclear why the school does not make the fees known in advance, but one reason might be to attract the widest possible pool of candidates from which to choose. Once the selection process is completed, prospective parents are informed of the results, and this is when information on school fees is distributed, with predictable results. Says the principal, 'There are a lot of aspirational families trying to get in but the heart-breaking [thing] is that the majority fall away because they cannot afford the full school fee.'

What parents also may not know is that exorbitant school fees are not the only costs that they might be required to meet up-front. Some of the elite schools charge an application fee that is non-refundable. This arrangement exists ostensibly to discourage parents from applying to more than one school for their child. So, for example, in 2019 Spruce Girls' School required a payment of R12 500 upon application—that is, even before a decision is made on selection. For a wealthy family this is easily affordable, and parents willingly spend such sums on two or three schools to ensure their son or

daughter is accepted at at least one of them. For a middle- or working-class parent, that amount of money is a substantial part of a hard-earned monthly salary; applying to more than one school therefore carries significant financial risk. The downside, of course, is that money is lost, whether or not the child is accepted.

What happens to the more than R12 000 spent on application fees? In one school, the money goes straight into the building fund, and this enables—as was witnessed from the principal's office—a flourishing infrastructure programme. The school is visibly on the move, and the new buildings certainly add to the prestige value of the institution, which, in turn, is used to good effect by the marketing team. In another elite school, the funds go into an interest-bearing account for the duration of the child's seven years of primary schooling. At the end of that period, the parent is asked to consider donating the accumulated funds back to the school as a gesture of thanks for the sound education the child received. Most parents do so, though there are some hardworking parents who simply require that the money be paid back to them.

In short, attending seven years (or more, where reception year and earlier preschool years are included) of an elite primary school in the Southern Suburbs of Cape Town involves upwards of R1 million when the costs of application, tuition, accommodation (where offered), special classes, sports, drama and music are all factored in. At Richmond Primary School, in Constantia, early enrolment in the school from Stage 1–2 through to Grade 12 would equate to spending R1 235 914 on fees alone for one child, without additional sibling costs, if the 2019 costs were held constant across the years of enrolment. In other words, the real costs would be closer to R2 million if the annual fee increases were taken into account over 16 years (four years of preschool and 12 years of formal schooling). And the costs to parents indicated in this fee structure are quite apart from the annual fundraising efforts directed at them by some of the schools and the donations made voluntarily by wealthy parents.

Curiously, some schools linked these hidden costs to their quest for greater diversity in the student body. For one prestigious girls' school, 'there's always expenses when you become more inclusive, because there's a lot more learning support [and] there's a lot more language support.' In other words, with more black students in the school, it is assumed that there are language or learning deficits for which the school has to provide compensatory

services. It should be noted that all of the former white schools are already providing learning support of various kinds to the diversity of children *within* its class of white enrolments. Furthermore, the classification of the mainly black middle-class students as having deficits of any kind is, of course, a misrepresentation of the diversity of talent within this group as well. Nonetheless, one of the prestige schools in this sample sees the added fees as linked to its inclusion policies. In fact, for the school, 'it's kind of like a luxury to do diversity well and that's hard, to keep the balance and affordability and inclusivity.'

A parent budgeting only for tuition fees is therefore in for a major shock. Capsicum School is not the only school issuing a long list of costs not included in the tuition fees: the overnight grade bonding camp, the drama levy, the photocopying levy, the computer upgrade levy, the photography and design levy, the art levy, the annual intercultural food day, the preparatory school levy for all excursions and hoodies, the software licence levy, the social action commitment levy, the Independent Examinations Board examination levy, the English and Drama Festival—and all of this excludes international trips.

That is why so many parents do not even bother to apply to the elite and stable middle-class schools—they simply cannot afford the price tag. Some would hope for relief from the school, such as a bursary (scholarship) or, if that fails, an exemption from paying fees.

## Does the fee-exemption policy facilitate access to middle-class schools?

The primary schools in this study do not typically offer scholarships, in contrast to the tradition of alumni support in the high schools. Parents must take responsibility for full payment. A white employer might pay for their domestic worker's black child—though this appears to be less frequent than thought—but other than this there are few options for poor parents, as primary schools offer little relief. White parents who have adopted a black child or children of course cover those costs.

As already indicated, the provinces do have fee-exemption policies, which means that a parent who cannot afford the fees can apply for exemption; the province then pays the school on behalf of the child. There are two problems with this arrangement. First, the formula used by the department to reimburse the school yields much less than the tuition the school charges. Second, and consequently, when a school has too large a

number of fee-exempt students, the overall effect is a budgetary crisis. It is the full-fee-paying students who enable a middle-class school to offer the full package of services that attracts and retains, especially, white enrolments. As the principal of an elite girls' school put it, 'We can't have too many bursaries because we don't get any other financial support from anywhere, so it's all on fees.' It is not surprising, therefore, that one of the stable middle-class schools is reluctant to encourage too many exemption applications: 'I have to inform every parent about their right to exemption … and in fact, most of our parents actually qualify for exemptions, if they knew. But we don't give them the figure.'

One former white school that has become a coloured-dominant co-educational school reflects the general risk associated with many fee-exemption students:

> *Our 2019 budget stands at R9.6 million, but the education department only gives us R200 000 (paid in two parts), and so we have to make up the difference from our school fees, since government only gives us 19 posts for 836 children, of which four, including the principal, are non-teaching positions. And so 15 additional teachers, an art teacher and other specialists have to be paid for from the school fees. Given our school fees of R11 000, for the fee-exempt learners we should have earned about R300 000 but the department only gave us R40 000.*

The situation is particularly precarious for these third-tier schools in the class structure, the fragile middle-class schools. They have a much larger proportion of enrolled students as fee-exempt candidates and therefore the difference between the fees levied and the fees paid by the department has a massive impact on the budget. This is also the class of schools where defaulting on payment is more common, and where schools are forced to write off larger amounts of bad debt.

It would make rational sense to tell the schools to simply lower their overall costs, but these are the aspirational schools among the former white institutions. These schools work hard to retain, but also extend, the facilities and opportunities they once enjoyed as whites-only schools, when the state provided the full range of funding required. The principals of these schools express their frustration at not being able to attract the children of more affluent

parents. As one put it, 'I can compete academically with the other schools but I just cannot compete against whiteness.' He meant that he simply did not have the resources that other schools have to project the status and prestige that a more competitive fee structure would enable his institution to achieve.

And yet, these fragile middle-class schools set their fees in ways that enable their offerings to be within the range of those which the stable middle-class and elite schools offer. So, for example, Laerskool Steph Stodel, with its ailing infrastructure and lower-end fees, still requires an additional compulsory cost (in 2019) of R4 560 for piano lessons and R4 320 for learning to play the recorder. The projected value of the school lies not only in the mainstream curriculum but also in the extracurricular offerings on display on its website. Needless to say, few parents within this class of schools can afford the extended programme.

It follows, therefore, that fee-exemption status might reduce the overall revenue of a school, but this does not inhibit the school from seeking, through its paying families, the additional resources required by a middle-class school. Southerns Primary School is one such school—with adept management of the school finances, including an effective debt collection strategy, it has built up substantial reserves of about R4 million:

> *With that money we also saved … we have never had a science lab, and we've never had a built-for-purpose library. So I wanted to have a resource centre, which I thought I can combine with the computers and all that stuff and create space for children. And so with [the treasurer's] frugal work we were able to build without the education department giving us a cent.*

Southerns, as a fragile middle-class school charging a mere R11 000 in school fees (for 2019), runs a tight ship and is able to build a respectable and attractive institution for its clientele, drawn mainly from the coloured professional classes. It has also been able to limit the number of fee-exempt students to about 20, to ensure that most parents pay their fees, and to build a steady savings account that enables the extensions mentioned earlier. Fee exemptions, while limiting, are not necessarily the death of a public school—especially when other mechanisms exist for getting around the policy in the first place.

## Getting around fee exemptions: Early lock-in

Government policy requires that schools inform parents of the possibility of applying for exemption. But there is a loophole. Most schools have, over time, established a preschool year (Grade R, or the so-called reception year), for which fee-exemption status does not apply, meaning that parents must pay, regardless of their socioeconomic status. The problem is that these preschool enrolments have a direct bearing on the racial profile of the school in subsequent years, since the well-off white early students are locked in for the later grades. This is how exclusion works in the finer detail of a school's operations, which are largely invisible to the puzzled parents who do not 'get in'.

For example, one stable middle-class public school has 25 places in its Grade R class. All but one of those children are white, and the parents can afford the R30 739 in fees (as of 2019), which is in fact 15.6 per cent higher than the R25 922 for the next year, Grade 1. Since there is no fee exemption prior to Grade 1, all parents must pay the full fee of R30 739 levied for Grade R. This means that these 25 children continue from Grade R to Grade 1 as a cohort, and so on, through the remaining grades to complete the primary school cycle. A Grade 1 parent would be hard-pressed to explain why they could afford the higher Grade R school fees but not the Grade 1 fees the following year.

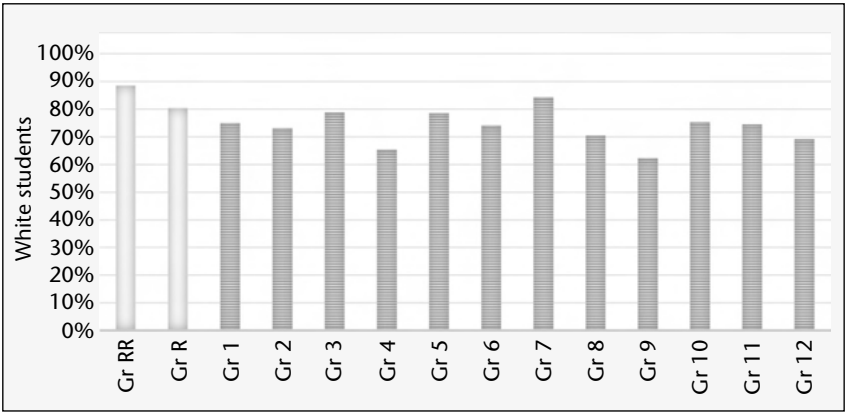


**Figure 4.3:** Early lock-in: Racial profiles across primary and secondary grades for Highlands Girls' School, 2019
*Source: CEMIS 2019 data*

Schools, incidentally, prefer these lock-in arrangements, since the academic standard as well as the academic culture of the school are established in the preschool grades, thus ensuring continuity in the academic programme for each and every child. But what this early lock-in arrangement also does is to ensure that nobody else gets in, since sideways entry (in, say, Grade 3 or 4) is only possible for individuals if the classroom size is made slightly larger or an additional class is added or because of unforeseen circumstances, such as family migration or death. The lock-in effects of race and class can clearly be seen in the enrolment patterns, over time, of two schools, one public and one private, as shown in Figure 4.3 and 4.4.

Figure 4.3 demonstrates the effect of the early lock-in policy on the racial profile of a school. The percentage of white students enrolling for Grades RR and R at Highlands Girls' School is 80 per cent or more. These students get preference for Grade 1 enrolment. The same principle is shown in Figure 4.4, for another stable middle-class school.

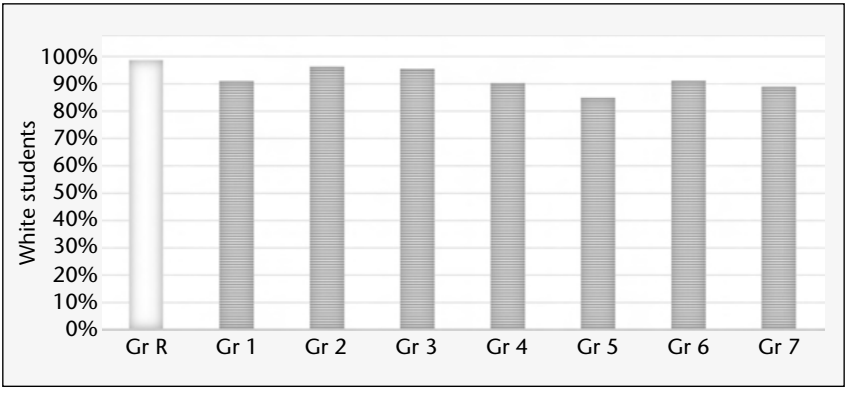


**Figure 4.4:** Early lock-in: Racial profile across primary grades for Laerskool Joos Adam, 2019
*Source: CEMIS 2019 data*

The lock-in arrangements that ensure continuity of enrolments by race and class (taking fee structure as a crude indicator of the socioeconomic status of the parents) are especially visible in comprehensive schools—that is, schools structured in such a way that a preschool is connected to a primary school, which, in turn, leads to a high school. In most cases, the parents need not reapply for the next phase of schooling, since the children move seamlessly

from one to another, thereby ensuring, again, very little chance of sideways entry, except for a few. As one principal of an elite comprehensive school saw it, 'If you start in nursery it's fifteen years and you move automatically.'

## The fee structure of sending and destination schools

And yet in the elite schools of the Southern Suburbs there is also a clear structure for progression, even in the absence of a comprehensive school structure such as exists in the case of Rosenthal Boys' Preparatory School or Highlands Girls' School. As a leader at one of the elite boys' schools (not included in this study) put it: 'The boys go straight from here to Bishops, to UCT, to the world of finance; repeat the cycle.' This primary school has no attached high school by the same name, and yet it has a natural destination school for its senior class.

This study did in fact find a striking correlation between the fees of the sending primary school and the destination school chosen or desired (as not all get their wishes) by the Grade 7 graduates. The school leaders were asked a simple question: Where do most of your Grade 7s go? While primary school principals often mentioned three to five schools that most of their transitioning students planned to attend, the students tend to 'stay in their lanes' in terms of class, as Figure 4.5 shows.

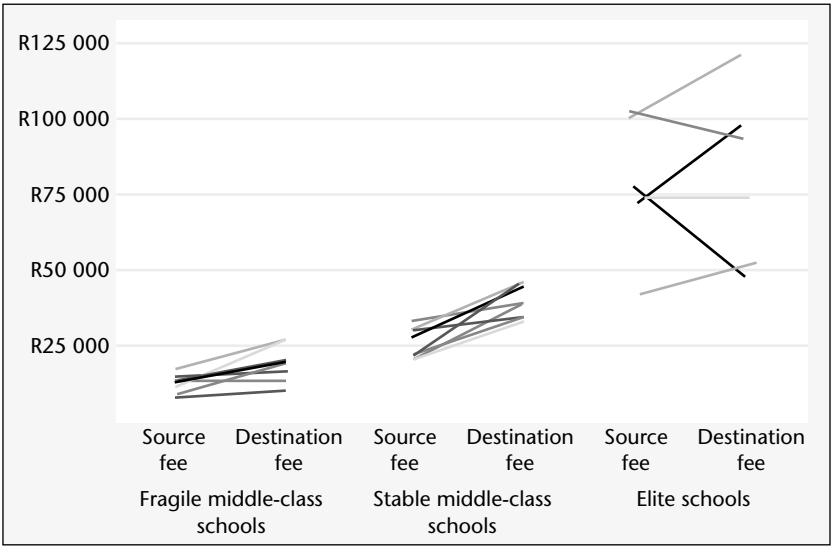


**Figure 4.5:** Fee range for sending (Grade 7) vs destination (Grade 8) schools
*Source: Data obtained from the schools*

The choice of destination schools makes sense, of course, from an affordability perspective. Parents in the fragile middle-class schools (such as Royal Primary School, Castle Primary School, Clinton Primary School) can only afford to send their children to schools with correspondingly lower-end school fees (such as Oude Molen Technical High School, Rhodes High School, Groote Schuur High School). Even though the fees of the high school are generally higher than those of the primary school, they are still within range for parents. At the same time, those parents with children in elite primary schools (such as Richmond Primary School, Capsicum School, Highlands Girls' School) tend to send their children to the connected elite high schools of the same name. Similarly, children in the stable middle-class primary schools (such as Kingstone Primary School, Gosling Girls' School, Redding Primary School) tend to continue on to similarly stable middle-class high schools (such as Wynberg Boys' High School, Westerford High School, Wynberg Girls' High School).

In the process, the class structure of these three tiers (elite, stable and fragile middle-class) is reproduced in the choice of destination schools, based partly on the affordability of the school fee structure from primary to high school, but also on a cultural affinity between the sending and receiving schools. Such affinity includes the fact that children from co-educational primary schools tend to enrol in co-educational senior schools, and the same applies of course to single-sex schools. The occasional student who crosses these class lines, such as from Bayside Primary School to Bishops Diocesan College, is usually one recruited on a scholarship because of exceptional skills in a particular sport. But for the most part, students 'stay in the lanes' imposed by class. Indeed, the fees issue is so determinative that in the elite schools it renders redundant all other policy instruments that schools might deploy in making admissions decisions.

## When fees (over)rule admissions decisions

'Bishops will take anyone who can afford their fees,' notes one principal. And he is correct. In the elite schools, students come from everywhere, and to accommodate those coming from a distance, boarding houses have been established. The basic tuition fees are in fact so expensive, in the region of R100 000 per annum for private schools, that policy instruments such as zoning or sibling privilege fall away completely. In these schools the high demand experienced by the more moderate-fee schools is tempered by the

sheer scale of the tuition fees. In other words, fewer students apply, and those who do are snapped up for purposes of securing the school's budget.

It is also these very-high-fee schools that can afford to be more experimental, as in the case of Capsicum School (at R95 450 for 2019), with its progressive approach to teaching and learning, as well as discipline. It is a school that invests heavily in the creative arts and it has no school uniform policy. Teachers and the principal are called by their first names, and there is a markedly relaxed atmosphere around the school.

In the same way, McKinley Primary School (at R104 160 for 2019) is designed to serve children with special learning needs, including those diagnosed with dyslexia, speech and language delays and Asperger's syndrome. The school has counsellors on site and also provides, under strict guidelines, the medication that various students might need during the course of the school day. The high fees are partly explained by the specialist function of the school.

Richmond Primary School, on the other hand, is a traditional private school, but its cost structure is very high, given its location on prime real estate bordering the Steenberg Vineyards, and given the extraordinary facilities it offers. The fees, at R101 052 for 2019, are among the highest in South Africa, and therefore Richmond Primary does need to recruit and retain every applicant, considering the substantial contribution of each enrolled student to the finances of the school. In this case, no other policy instruments are used to decide on admissions outside the ability to pay the hefty price tag. Specialist teachers would literally lose their posts if two or three students were to leave the school for any reason. In other words, what a school can do—but also what it becomes—depends crucially on the question of fees.

## How fees shape the identity of a school

In the case of transitional schools—those lying on the border between what we call fragile middle-class schools and stable middle-class schools—the fee structure has a significant effect on how the school is seen from the outside, but also on what kind of institution it wishes to become. This was the case with Bayside Primary School, a former white school conscious of the fact that it hovers between being a more affluent white school and a more inclusive black school.

'When I arrived more than three years ago,' recalls the principal, 'one of our first discussions was on the question: Do we want to become an elite school?' For the school head this was a choice, something that the governing body could determine as a matter of policy. The principal explained: 'Elite in the sense that we only take people of a certain income bracket,' which invariably would mean that the school would serve a more stable middle-class community of mainly white and coloured families. Parents in a higher income bracket would bring the capacity for paying higher fees, which in turn would define what kind of school Bayside Primary would become.

The first coloured principal of this former white school would, together with the governing body, make a different choice—'to become an inclusive school', so that working and middle-class families from the adjacent coloured areas of Heathfield, Retreat, Steenberg, Diep River and Grassy Park could also access the school. The main policy instrument for achieving this was applying a zone with a radius of five kilometres around the school. This brought immediate criticism from mainly the older white teachers on the staff, since the enrolment of more coloured children from working-class areas threatened the comfortable middle-class assumptions that could be made about children and their parents.

Up to that point, the class status of incoming students at Bayside Primary had meant one could assume 'parents who are at home who can help with the homework', or even help out at the school during a typical school day. On the other hand, the changing racial status of the new incoming class meant, in the minds of the white staff, that 'standards are going to drop'. Guided by his own life story, the coloured principal stood firm, but he had to constantly explain that becoming a more inclusive school is not inimical to becoming a strong academic school. The difficulty he faced was the association of whiteness with excellence and, up to that point, a more competitive fee structure had secured that perception of the school. With these changes, however, more and more white parents took their children to white-dominant schools, such as the more expensive Kingstone Primary School or, if they could afford it, to the even more white-exclusive Sierra Primary School nearby.

Few schools, however, have the choice as to whether they become elite or solidly middle-class or one or the more fragile middle-class institutions. The fee structure is often dictated by the pressures of demography. For example, a lower middle-class school with falling white enrolments and changing patterns of home ownership in the neighbourhood has no choice

but to keep the fees low in order to enrol more students. The risk for such schools is the capacity of parents to pay the modest school fees.

## When schools say 'no' to defaulting parents

While public schools cannot eject a student from a school because of the non-payment of fees, private schools can do so, and when this happens the results are devastating for the defaulting parents and, most of all, for the bewildered child. The principal of a private girls' school was clear on this issue: 'The only time we ask people to leave, I hate to say it, is when they haven't paid their fees.' The way in which the school rationalises such an exclusionary decision is that it is in the best interests of the defaulting family: 'They have to leave because we are not doing them any favours by building up debt. We don't allow them to build up more than two terms' debt ever [and when that happens] they've got to leave.' The school might help in the search for a bursary or some benefactor that could help, but if this does not work, the child has to be withdrawn.

The fees of a school therefore exclude not only as a matter of *disinclination*—that is, the reluctance of parents to apply from the outset because of the high fees—but also by means of *discontinuation*, when a school terminates the studies of a particular student whose parents have failed to pay the fees. Parents naturally fight discontinuation, and in the course of this study we found that DStv, the paid television satellite service, features regularly as a measure of self-sacrifice to enable parents to pay the fees. As one principal put it, 'They cancel their DStv to send their children here'; another school leader calls it a matter of priorities: 'Do you have DStv? I mean, we as a family have one car, we don't have DStv and we haven't been on holiday in six years.'

## Conclusion

School fees, this study has found, act as a public signal about access, in that the published notice of the fees structure indicates clearly whom the school is for. Accordingly, most parents do not apply to elite schools, simply because they cannot afford the stated fee. But fees do much more than invite or disinvite potential parents based on affordability; they also communicate powerful messages about race, class, culture and identity that influence the decisions of prospective parents about whether or where to apply for the few places open in a competitive placement process.

A crucial point about fees, though, is that it is a policy instrument that does not exclude or include all by itself. While fees are undoubtedly 'the 1 000-pound elephant in the room', in the words of one of our interviewees, their exclusionary power comes from a range of other policy instruments that work together to maintain the race and class status of the stable middle-class and elite schools. Nothing is more powerful in cutting off new applications at the knees than instruments that leverage historical advantage in the process of selecting students—such as sibling and heritage privilege, which is discussed in the next chapter.

# CHAPTER 5

# Sibling and Heritage Privilege: How the Past Secures Privilege in the Present

> *Affirmative action for successful families [legacy admissions] is an engine of inequity.*
>
> —New York Times (2019)

## Introduction

Nothing projects racial privilege more flagrantly than a child being selected for admission to a former white school based simply on the fact that a family member attended that school in the past. It is, without question, 'a thumb on the scale' in favour of white, privileged students and is inherently 'anti-meritocratic, inhibits social mobility and helps perpetuate a de facto class system; it is an engine of inequity' (*New York Times* 2019; see also Hurwitz 2011).

Heritage advantage means that in the past a parent or grandparent attended the same school. Sibling privilege means that the applicant child has a brother or sister currently enrolled in the school. As one set of policies in the spider's web that determines who gets into privileged schools, sibling or heritage status offers the most direct and inexpensive route to the reproduction of privilege. Together, these twin policies still act as powerful instruments of inclusion and exclusion in South African schools.

## Sibling status as school policy

The criterion regarding sibling status is usually stated simply in a school's admissions policy, such as this clause from one of the institutions in this study:

> *Applicants who are siblings of current learners, even though [our school] may not be the nearest ordinary primary school to their domicile, receive preferential interviews and may be considered for placement ahead of learners with no family connection to the school.*

In several of the schools studied, sibling status ensures preferential treatment. In other words, a student is either pushed up the list of applicants for consideration and/or guaranteed an interview (in schools that conduct interviews) to be considered for enrolment at their school of choice.

In other schools, the mere fact that there is a sibling already on the premises guarantees access—no questions asked—regardless of other intervening processes, such as an interview. Highlands Girls' School is one such school that offers unfettered access to siblings:

> *It's unusual not to accept all our siblings because that's part of our ethos of the school, that we're a family school. We want parents to invest in the school, we want the girls to be invested [in the school]. So, it's irrespective of who their siblings are, what they have done, what their abilities are, what they've been involved in, completely irrespective, siblings are on our first list.*

But a minority of schools are aware that while the already enrolled sibling might possess the virtues sought by an elite institution, the other might not, and that is why in such cases there is a screening process—an interview, most commonly—to determine whether the sibling, while otherwise favoured, should be granted admission.

A sibling policy can override other admissions policies of a school. In a minority of schools, the sibling policy ensures access for a younger child of a family in later years, regardless of circumstances. For example, if one sibling was enrolled at the school while the parents lived within the feeder zone—a critical element in admissions decisions—and the parents subsequently move to a residential area far outside the feeder zone, the younger sibling would still be admitted, even though living outside the feeder zone would otherwise automatically disqualify a family seeking admission. There are, however, high-in-demand schools which, for that reason, disqualify the sibling that comes later, given the press for admission from those within the feeder zone.

The point is that the sibling policy is a flexible instrument in the hands of the school leadership. It can expedite access, as it does across most of the former white schools, based simply on the presence of an already-enrolled sibling at the school, or it could come with soft conditions (the interview) or be cancelled out by harsh exclusion (the feeder zone). The power to make

these decisions rests in the hands of the school governing body (SGB), which sets the admissions policy, and its executing authority, the school principal. The head of a sought-after co-educational school in the Southern Suburbs puts it bluntly: 'The principal's discretion is the admissions criteria.'

What this means, therefore, is that an enlightened school could wield the sibling policy to advance access to black or poor students or to restrict less desirable white students if it wanted to. But what is a sibling in the first place?

## Siblings: A question of definition

According to the simplest definition, a sibling is a child who shares the same biological parents as another child. It is not, however, as straightforward as that, given the reality of how families are constituted, especially in the racially diverse homes and communities of Cape Town. Some schools grapple with these conceptions of sibling status precisely because of the high-stakes game of admissions to elite institutions. The discussion that follows includes questions that arose from an open discussion with school leaders at one of the 'whitest' girls' schools in the Southern Suburbs.

Is the newly adopted child of a family a sibling? Is a black child adopted into a white family a sibling at the point of admission? Is the child of a domestic worker who lives with a white family a sibling of the white family's children? Are the children of the extended family of a black household, of whom there are a few at the school to begin with, to be regarded as a siblings? Is a half-brother or -sister of a child currently at the school a sibling of that child?

None of these definitional disputes would matter, of course, in the case of an ordinary school where demand is low or an extraordinary school where the fees are prohibitively high. But in the range of mid-fee schools with high reputations, the definition of a sibling could mean that some desperate applicants are admitted and others are not. How a school decides what a sibling is gives the institution enormous power.

## The exclusionary power of sibling policies

To grasp the power of the sibling policy in sustaining white-dominant schools, one has to observe its operations. Say an elite primary school has a single class of 25 Grade 1 children that it selects every year. The school discovers that in the applicant pool for this particular academic year there are 19 children among the applicants who are siblings of older children in the same school. The siblings in the upper grades are mainly white, given

the history of admissions to the school, and very few of the older children are black. Since this school guarantees unconditional access to siblings, only six places are now left for other children. Since the second criterion in the admissions policy arsenal is proximity to the school, the remaining six places go to children living in the expensive suburb that surrounds the school; they are invariably from white, wealthy families. And that is how former white schools remain exclusively or predominantly white, as shown in Table 5.1, which illustrates the impact of siblings in a particular year.

**Table 5.1:** Sibling numbers, seats available and number of new applicants at three schools

| | Siblings already enrolled | Number of seats available | Number of new applications |
|---|---|---|---|
| **School X** | 46 siblings | 50 seats | x |
| **School Y** | 15 siblings | 30 seats | 193 applications |
| **School Z** | 14 siblings | 20 seats | 180 applications |

*Source: School documents and interview data*

In other words, sibling policy, when well executed by a former white school, reproduces race and class privilege in powerful ways. Consider this exchange between the researchers and the school leadership during an interview at Rosenthal Boys' Preparatory School:

> *Researcher: Despite everything, your school remains overwhelmingly white as far as learner enrolments are concerned.*
>
> *School leader: Yes.*
>
> *Researcher: Why is that the case?*
>
> *School leader: I think to some extent we've had families that have continued through their siblings coming to the school. I would say that because we've built this gradually, in Grade 7 I would say our profile is skewed.*

Siblings can guarantee the whiteness of the school. Certainly, there are some schools that recognise the deadening effect of this calculus of privilege on the racial composition of their student bodies and therefore make adjustments to policy such that a small number of black students are admitted. One school

drops the residence criterion after considering sibling status. Another school inserts 'diversity' into its top three selection criteria and would even call around to neighbouring schools for, say, 'an African girl' here or 'a Coloured boy' there, seeking racial representation, however minimal, in a particular academic year. This trade in individuals across some of the Southern Suburbs schools is exactly that—about a few individuals—and does little to change the overall racial composition of, especially, the elite schools.

It is nonetheless fascinating to observe how schools order the criteria for admissions in ways that sustain racial and class privilege. Spruce Girls' School sets the criteria as Catholic first, then siblings (unconditional) and then heritage status. Unsurprisingly, it remains one of the whitest schools in the Southern Suburbs, and there is a sense that this race and class status does not bother the governors or managers of the school in the slightest. The school has merely applied its policy. It is also the one school that spoke openly about ejecting students who did not keep up with the school fees, a leverage it holds because it is a private institution. In this particular school the 'tight' relationship between sibling policy and other control measures—religious identity and heritage status—ensures that the institution changes only at the margins as a small number of non-white student families try to secure admission.

What makes this spider's web of interlocking policies even more effective at keeping schools white is the early lock-in of siblings in schools with preschool facilities.

## Siblings from the start

'We give preference to siblings,' says the principal of the most prestigious Afrikaans primary school in this study. But then he adds: 'Many of the siblings are already at Paddastoeltjies.' Paddastoeltjies (a pseudonym) is the preschool facility on the grounds of Laerskool Joos Adam. The principal's observation is very significant, since most schools enable the automatic passage of children from the private arrangements of the reception year, where fees are mandatory, to the public arrangements of Grade 1, where exemption from fees can be applied for in public schools.

What this means is that children, in this case siblings, move into the primary grades without any further screening, since their first entry into the system came about on grounds of sibling status. Since those siblings, as at Joos Adam, are all white, the racial composition of the entry years is

also exclusively white, except perhaps for one or two black children. Here the interlocking effects of different policies are once again evident in the admissions decisions of a school. In this case, sibling policy offers not only initial access through a private preschool but guarantees continuing access into the normal public school.

## The internal policy upholding sibling policy

Sibling policy is so obviously discriminatory that it requires, on the part of a school, an internal narrative—that is, a story the school tells itself in order to justify the exclusionary practice. Among the institutions in this study, the most common justification is the narrative that the school is a family or community school. In other words, the school serves those in the neighbouring suburb and in this way builds and sustains the family and the community. In the warm language of the premier Afrikaans primary school's admissions policy: 'Gesinne wat tradisioneel Joos Adam-leerders lewer, se jonger kinders bly welkom, al sou hul verhuis' ('The children of families who traditionally deliver Joos Adam students remain welcome even if they relocate elsewhere').

This internal narrative is invested with a persuasive logic, especially in the case of primary schools. Children can literally walk to school or, more accurately, when it comes to small children, be accompanied by a parent or the domestic worker to the school down the road. School meetings are within easy reach. School duties that parents often share in require only a short trip around the corner. Everyone in the community comes to know each other, with the school as the common gathering place. In a normal society, this is a perfect answer to building strong communities.

In the same way, siblings of the same family attend the same school. It would indeed be inconvenient for a parent to drop one child at the nearby school but travel elsewhere to drop off the sibling. When more than two children are involved, the practicality of a common school becomes even more evident. As Spruce Girls' School puts it, 'We like to keep families together.' The siblings, in addition, build a particular culture in the school as an extended family unit. As Highlands Girls' School argues, 'The ethos of our school is siblings.' Siblings therefore form a vital part of the connective tissue that binds school and community together.

The obvious downside of the sibling policy narrative is that, given the tight relationship between school and suburb, it benefits mainly white and

middle-class to wealthy parents. The spatial arrangements of apartheid have hardly shifted in South Africa over two decades, and therefore sibling policy, as applied by most schools, achieves another goal, whether intended or not, and that is to keep schools predominantly white. This is difficult to change without, as some schools attempt to do, modifying the sibling clause itself.

## Can tweaking sibling policy aid transformation?

The elite institutions in this study have no sibling policy, because their fees are so high that demand is low, and therefore any child is considered for placement, provided the family can pay. In this case the sibling policy is redundant, and the school remains emphatically white majority by other means.

The fragile middle-class schools, most of which are now black majority, have a sibling policy only because the schools are more accessible in terms of costs and therefore in higher demand. The sibling policy becomes in this case a management tool for handling large numbers where transformation is no longer a necessary pursuit, at least as far as student enrolments are concerned.

It is in the stable middle-class institutions, where fees are within reach of most middle-class black and white parents, that sibling policy matters most in terms of transformation. On the one hand, sibling policy is a mechanism for managing large numbers of applications that could, without some filter, turn the school significantly black. On the other hand, sibling policy, as the schools concede, slows down the pace of transformation. So, what do these schools do?

Some of the stable middle-class schools give themselves room to manoeuvre with a clause in the admissions policy that says the school 'reserves the right to afford preference'. This means that the school can pursue sibling privilege but also enforce a cut-off to enable a minority of black students to gain access despite the policy. This is particularly true in schools where Grade R enrolments, mainly white, automatically gain entrance to Grade 1, making the sibling clause even harder to break. In such cases the school might consider flexibility and reserve spaces for out-of-zone families without a sibling connection to the school. Once again, such adjustments are for small numbers of non-white students on an individual level and therefore, however much sibling policy is tweaked, they have little effect on the overall enrolments in elite and stable middle-class schools, where the majority of students remain white.

## Sibling differences

Not all siblings are the same, and that is why some of the former white schools are wary of automatic acceptance: 'Yes, we consider siblings, but not immediately,' explains one school. Indeed, in the more competitive schools, siblings might enjoy 'serious consideration', but not before a screening process for aptitude and behaviour determines whether the second child is a good fit for the school; this is part of what we call 'social selection', which is discussed in Chapter 6. Even in Clinton Primary School, a former white school turned black, the principal is uneasy about siblings for this very reason: 'I do look at siblings, but also it depends on the interview. Siblings are not always the best indicator for admitting children; not all children have a flourishing reputation at school and then we are in a difficult situation since we are a fee-paying school.'

Parents in the more fragile middle-class schools often assume that because there is already a sibling at the school, they can be tardy with the application for the later child and the payment of fees. Principals take a dim view of such attitudes: 'Siblings cause a problem in terms of fees [and] the parents do not always stick to timeframes … They think that their child is already here and apply late because "I deserve it". But we try to make space.' In some fragile middle-class schools, abuse of sibling privilege is swiftly dealt with. A high-in-demand school with low school fees would often exclude late-applicant siblings.

The principal of Clinton Primary School is clear that there needs to be some parity of performance among the siblings for a positive admissions decision:

> *I do have a number of siblings and if, for example, two [siblings perform] equally in terms of their interview performance, I would then lean towards the sibling because obviously it makes it easier for the parent to have all their children in one school rather than commute to different schools.*

The point here is that some of the former white schools with a sibling policy do take care to find out who the sibling is before ushering the younger sibling through the door, due to the social, academic and representational risks that automatic admission entails.

Siblings are also different in their personalities and educational aspirations. An older sibling might fit well into a competitive science and mathematics school such as Westerford High School, but the younger child might find the 'artier' environment of Capsicum School to be a good fit. In this case, the parent might decide to send the second child to a different school, or the school might advise the parent about a more appropriate school. In the case of children with disabilities, for example, one school might offer better services than another. The principal of a progressive school captured the point about the differing needs of children well:

> *It's very rare that if a sibling applies that we wouldn't offer them a place; the siblings are usually allowed because the school attracts people who see the value [we offer] …. There was a family from Gunter Primary School [who decided] the child will go to Westerford [High School] and the father was hyper-masculine, spoke over his child; this child was so silent and didn't exist. It was horrific, he was like aggressive and you could see him sitting there thinking, 'I really want my child to go to a school where I don't have to pay these fees.'*
>
> *And straight after them a Waldorf family came with a lovely child in Grade 7 who is applying for Grade 8 and the father was gentle, humble; he let his child talk …. What's lovely for us is to work here [since the school] does tend to attract gentleness, warmth.*

These are among the many factors that a school or parent might use to decide on sending children to different schools. In the case of single-sex schools, a sister and brother would of course also attend different schools, though in such cases this is almost always at what is regarded as the 'sister school' nearby.

## Sibling advantage and the passage of time

With the admission of small numbers of black students, sibling privilege as a barrier to transformation slowly erodes over time, since at some point the older child hands the opportunity down to the younger child. In some schools in this study there is evidence of this beginning to happen, but in a particular way. As argued earlier, the black children coming in are from middle-class and wealthy coloured and, to a lesser degree, African families. Since their

numbers are small, however, the number of siblings coming in is also small, but the privilege holds. At Mulberry Girls' School, comfortably concealed in the leafy suburbs, those children are from predominantly wealthy Muslim families. Their numbers are significant enough that this and another elite school have made special arrangements for these high-fee-paying parents, including facilities for prayer. The siblings have added to the small but now visible number of black Muslim students.

If black enrolment numbers escalated for whatever reason, then the sibling impact would not only be transformative in relation to white enrolments but possibly determinative in the course of time. This was indeed the case at one former white co-educational school, where 200 applications were received for a grade but only eight places were open as a result of the sibling policy. Many white families had already moved their children to other schools as the school turned coloured and, among other factors, the sibling numbers for children of colour had dominated.

What remains striking among the elite and stable middle-class schools of the Southern Suburbs is how few African students are enrolled. In the case of this specific group, the effect of sibling impact on enrolments is virtually nil. The relatively small number of African middle-class families in the province compared to Gauteng in the north, but also compared to coloured and Indian families in the region, means that little change can be expected to flow from sibling advantage in the foreseeable future. Thus are the already entrenched inequalities in the Western Cape deepened. It is, however, not simply the small size of the African demographic in schools that explains the greater inclusion of coloured and Indian students; it is also blunt discrimination towards those at the lower end of apartheid's racial hierarchy, as will be shown in subsequent chapters.

## Heritage privilege

Sibling advantage does not, however, exist on its own. Together with heritage privilege, it acts as a powerful policy instrument in reproducing race and class privilege in the former white schools of the Southern Suburbs. If sibling policy allocates advantage based on the present, heritage adds to such privilege by recognising a family association with the school in the past. That past can span decades—in other words, back to a time when schools were legally still all white. Even 20 years into the new century, the privilege of heritage advances the interests of white children more than any other group

because of the continuity of race and enrolments in the stable middle-class and elite schools. To grasp the scope of the privilege offered by heritage, consider Table 5.2, which shows an extract from the admissions application form of a top girls' school.

**Table 5.2:** A portion of the admissions application form of an elite girls' school

| | Name | Matric year | House |
|---|---|---|---|
| Sibling | | | |
| Mother | | | |
| Aunt | | | |
| Grandmother | | | |

*Source: Provided by the school*

The lineage goes back to grandparents, or grandmothers, in the case of this girls' school, but also incorporates 'aunts' in the family. This was certainly the case at a Catholic girls' school, where the reasoning was that '[p]ast pupils are very important and if the dad's sister was here, for example, because it's not fair to only take the mom because it might be the dad's family.' A relative who attended one of these schools, some of which are centenarians, would therefore gain automatic access. The emphatic advantage given is clear.

There is no more striking evidence of the effects of heritage than the photographs that adorn the walls of the elite and stable middle-class schools. For decades, the students in the photographs by grade and by sports or other clubs are all white. Then, gradually into the 1990s, the first black students appear. But the relative numbers of black and white students stay steady in these two groups of schools over time. One of the reasons is the heritage advantage, among other exclusionary policies in the spider's web.

Why would schools do this? In other words, what is the internal narrative held by the school leadership to justify such unfair advantage?

## The internal narrative upholding heritage policy

The main argument for granting heritage advantage is a sense of loyalty to the family line. It is not disconnected from the family or community school narrative that upholds sibling privilege. One school's admissions policy sets out this rationale:

> *Bayside Primary School has deep roots in the community, having been established in 1950. Children whose parent/s were past learners of Bayside will receive a preferential interview and may be considered for placement ahead of learners with no family connection to the school.*

This sense of connecting the past and the present through the children demonstrates that the school is invested in its alumni. But there is another reason: money. A family repays the loyalty to lineage in the form of reliable fee payments and generous funding for everything from a new media laboratory to an additional AstroTurf surface for the hockey teams.

It is the case, however, that the funding motivation is more strongly pursued in high schools than in the primary schools that this study focused on. Still, the issue of funding income is relevant, since some primary schools do make the case for financial support, but also because several of the schools are 'preparatory' in nature, which means they are linked directly to a high school that benefits from loyalty to heritage through the system.

The third and unspoken reason for the retention of heritage is, of course, that it keeps the school the way it always has been, even if changes are made in marginal enrolments. Heritage strengthens the spider's web of policies that keep schools white, whether intentional or not. It is not, however, simply a matter of white enrolments, but also about the dominant culture or ethos of the school; the kind of students admitted is vital for the perpetuation of the character of the institution. It is for this reason that schools speak openly of outsiders or non-traditional students 'fitting in' rather than the school considering 'filling out' into a more inclusive school culture.

Heritage cements tradition and links the past to the present in powerful ways, even more than two decades into South Africa's post-apartheid democracy. As the outgoing principal of a prestigious boys' school noted, when he walked onto the school grounds he would see 183 children, out of a total of 800, whose fathers he had also taught.

## The discomfort with heritage

Heritage privilege is more obviously discriminatory than the sibling policy, since it is directly linked to the apartheid past. For this reason, most of the 30 schools in the sample claimed to no longer use heritage status in their selection decisions. One school said that they 'were told not to' use heritage, but it was unclear which authority made this point. And, indeed, all schools

claiming not to use the policy cited transformation commitments. One school argued that heritage 'will perpetuate our past; in terms of transformation, will make us go slow', and another said it had dropped this privilege because 'that means you're perpetuating white'.

In the past, heritage worked seamlessly at a time when all-white schools were required under the apartheid state. One teacher remembers: 'When my son came here, he was 7 years old and his father was an old boy, and there was lots of history. So when we came with our son the headmaster said, "There's a place for your son." Nowadays that doesn't happen.'

The claim that heritage privilege 'does not happen' anymore was hard to verify in practice, because although some schools said this privilege had been scrapped, it emerged later in interviews that this was not the case. Also, there were schools that denied upholding heritage privilege but whose websites declared that 'old boys and/or old girls' would be offered preferential treatment in admissions.

Nevertheless, there remains a sense of ambivalence about heritage as a factor in admissions among several schools in this study, such as in the case of Gunter Primary School: 'We did look at alumni but there's a kind of debate at the SGB because alumni are historically pretty white, but change is happening so most of our alumni are not so white anymore.' The same ambivalence was detected at one of the boutique girls' schools, Highlands Girls', where the leadership team told us 'old girls, not so much', but then conceded that heritage mattered once all the other criteria had been applied. Those include siblings, diversity and then 'past pupils' followed by area of residence and something called 'the needs of the learner'. The tension between past loyalties and future transformation was clearly at play when it came to the vexed issue of recognising the children of old boys and old girls.

Peakrest Primary School was another school which revealed ambivalence on the matter of heritage. The principal was clear that 'if this school, like any other, factored in old boys there would be no transformation'. At the same time, he basked in the heritage advantage the school enjoyed:

> *We don't look at old boys, old girls. But I've got three children here currently whose parents I taught here in Grade 5. So there is a niceness to it where the dad walks through the door and says 'Morning, sir' and I say 'Yeah, keep it like that'. They live in [road], so they got in on that basis'.*

The retention of heritage in admissions policy has also become a point of debate among activist parents at the same school, as one mother pushing for change recalls:

> *So that was one of the criteria we do not [support]. It was there, but the burden was children of alumni would also be considered. But we argued that in the current climate you cannot even have that word in your policy. And arguments were made, 'But they give us money.'*

The use of heritage in selection nevertheless continues at the former white schools, as one principal of a more diverse school in the sample observes: 'A lot of schools battle in that area, particularly around alumni.' However, the same principal acknowledges that this problem is more acute in high schools, and for an interesting reason:

> *When pupils do well, who do they always give credit to? They give credit to their high school. I haven't come across any person who does well at university and actually goes back to their primary school, where they spent eight years compared to only five years that they spent [at high school].*

This partly explains the more prevalent use of heritage policy in high schools and the continuing ambivalence about such advantage being used in 'the primary schools, where they get their grounding'. Still, there are schools that no longer use heritage as a consideration in admissions policy. Why the change?

One of the main reasons is that other, less embarrassing, policies ensure the same end, namely that the dominant population of the school remains white and middle class or elite, and that the dominant culture of the school is retained. In such cases, sibling policy is powerful in maintaining the pattern of enrolments, just as the high school fees exclude mainly those who are black and poor. Zoning policy works closely with these other instruments to restrict entry to a preferred race and class of students. In other words, heritage policy, with all its negative connotations of a white, exclusive past, can be jettisoned without cost by many of the elite and stable middle-class schools.

Alternatively, heritage can be placed in tension with other policy instruments in the spider's web to try and tweak admissions towards transformation ends. Highlands Girls' School has a finely tuned policy web for signalling transformation commitments, even as it remains clear about its loyalty to alumni: 'If there are old girls we also need to bear in mind that we do have an old girl constituency that we do not want to lose. And so originally it used to be sibling and then old girl, and I've changed that to sibling, diversity and old girl.' How does such a complex balancing act work in practice?

> *What we do is we look at the ratio of old girls and siblings and diversity candidates. So African black is first put in, then the rest of our girls of colour, and old girls, and we try and look at balancing them … It would be discriminatory to have no access for people who have no old girl status, no diversity status and no sibling status, so we take from our non-affiliate members as well.*

In this case three vital issues are balanced—race, heritage and sibling status—and one would expect a visible shift in the diversity of enrolments. Yet this school remains predominantly white. Why? For one thing, because these fine adjustments are made for the few black individuals who clear other hurdles first—such as the ability to pay the very high school fees as required in a private institution. The tweaking therefore involves a very small number of individuals, and in some years, nobody qualifies for this seemingly progressive move away from heritage privilege. This is especially true for the group least represented in this white-dominant school, as one of the school leaders conceded with this awkward statement: 'My greatest difficulty is African black girls.' This leader grapples to find the reason why there are so few students from this group that is vastly underrepresented in the school but that constitutes more than 80 per cent of the country's population: 'We know it's us. There's something we're doing that is not … It's either the perception of the parents that their girls won't feel safe and comfortable or that they would be the "other" or "one" or "single" or whatever it might be.'

## Heritage privilege does not require a policy

Only a third of the schools (10) in the sample studied explicitly acknowledged using heritage in their selection decisions. What became clear, though, was

that even where schools do not have a heritage policy, they nevertheless benefit from the simple fact that parents often send their children to the school precisely because they were once students there. In other words, despite losing the advantage of heritage, admission is secured thanks to other policy instruments, such as residing in the feeder zone or being able to afford the school fees. This was certainly the case at Southerns Primary School, where

> *[o]ften parents say they move their child from this school to this school because your extramural programme is bigger, so that's also a factor, but I think the majority of children come because their parents have been here. I have a lot of ex-pupils who have children coming here and they are in the area.*

Where a school retains its academic reputation and strong values orientation in the community, middle-class parents simply continue to send their children there, whether it is a 'white school turned black', such as Southerns, in the respectable area of Wetton; a richly diverse school, such as Redding Primary School; or even a predominantly white school such as Highlands Girls' School. In other words, the standing of a school ensures a de facto heritage advantage that benefits the institution, even in the absence of an announced policy.

## Conclusion

Whenever a privilege is taken away, or even modified, it can be expected that those who benefited from it will feel harmed. 'Old girls aren't talking to us,' said the leaders of one of the most sought-after and demanding public girls' schools on the Main Road dividing the Southern Suburbs. It was meant as a half joke, because in fact the parents were complaining that 'the school would like [to retain] it but we said "no" as a governing body'. And yet, there was no widespread revolt against the claimed relaxation of heritage privilege, because children got in anyway, since they satisfied other admissions criteria.

It appears that schools do consider heritage status positively, even when it is not stated as such in the admissions policy. Regardless of stated discomforts, in the middle-class schools the heritage of race was secured more obviously than the heritage of family in admissions practices. Even so, family heritage matters little in the competitive, elite schools where any fee-paying student holds high value for the institution.

Heritage, however, is not simply the preservation of the racial character of a school through admitting siblings and the children of alumni. It is also something captured in the continuing culture of the school—the set of values, dispositions, behaviours and ambitions that retain the past in the present. For this to be achieved, schools have to make choices based on much more than family ties; they also choose based on the values that a child brings into the school—a value system into which non-traditional students are supposed to fit. This is called social selection, and it is the topic of the next chapter.

# CHAPTER 6

# Social Selection: The Hidden Rules of Who Gets In and Why

*The parents who can afford our fees are linguistically able [in English].*
—Principal of an elite boys' school

## Introduction

Virtually every school in this study starts its admissions policy statement with an innocent disclaimer similar to that of Kingstone Primary School: 'No pupil will be refused admission to the school on grounds of race, culture, religious belief or financial circumstance.' Of course, this claim is open to challenge, given overt as well as covert policies such as social selection.

Social selection is mostly invisible to parents seeking admission to the Southern Suburbs schools. It is barely listed on the websites, where feeder zones, siblings and heritage status are the obvious elements of the admissions policy. As one activist parent sees it: 'There's an external policy on the website and then if you dig a little deeper there's a hidden policy. There's always a way these policies work and that's how they keep you out.' Such hidden policy is powerful precisely because this kind of selection is intangible.

Social selection, in this regard, is the capacity of the school to select for class and culture by looking for attributes that cohere with the school's sense of itself. The sting of social selection lies beyond explanation to frustrated parents who often wonder why they did not 'get in' despite meeting, at least formally, all the publicised criteria for admission to their school of choice. This chapter lays bare the operations of social selection in South Africa's former white, middle-class schools.

## A settled history

Most of Cape Town's former white schools are products of the region's colonial past. The Cape Colony was home to some of the earliest educational institutions in southern Africa, and they flourished as government schools from the 1830s and church schools deep into the twentieth century (Ludlow

2016). The (now diminishing number of) white Afrikaans schools in the City Bowl and Southern Suburbs emerged from a different tradition—the rise of Afrikaner nationalism—while the new private schools of the Cape are often products of commercial ventures by wealthy entrepreneurs. It is, however, the traditional English schools that dominate the landscape of suburban Cape Town and that form the key focus of this study.

To this day, the centenarians among the 30 primary schools in this study reflect, in content, character and culture, their founding origins as British schools (Hawthorne & Bristow 1993:13). Regarded as the most successful export of Empire, these schools in their early years were described as 'nurseries of imperial patriotism' (Lambert 2004:67) ahead of the two World Wars of the twentieth century. The very first headmasters and headmistresses themselves mainly came from England, 'instilling in [the youth of the country] the ethos of excellence that had been born in Europe's halls of learning' (Hawthorne & Bristow 1993:12).

The rigid uniform structures, alternating between winter and summer dress, come from that earlier history. The preferred sporting codes date back to the old country: cricket, for example, is standard fare and some of the most prominent schools are situated around the famous Newlands Cricket Ground, where early matches divided the two English sides into 'Mother Country and Colonial Born' (Odendaal et al 2016:29). Indeed, in the early days of its founding, 'a school was often judged by its success on the rugby and cricket fields rather than by its educational standing' (Lambert 2004:71).

The English language has remained a criterion for admission to all these schools ever since their founding. The names of prominent Cape schools reflect their imperial connections, from Windsor Preparatory and St George's Grammar School to Settlers High and Rhodes High School. The Englishness of the schools is visible in their architecture and culture, from the design of the chapel and the sculptures on the grounds to the accent of the language itself. Indeed, Wynberg Boys' High School was designed by the well-known English architect Sir Herbert Baker. The Anglican hymnbooks in the chapel of one school and the cemetery for Dominican nuns on the grounds of another speak to histories entwined with that of Empire.

Every year, the old English schools stage solemn ceremonies in honour of those South African boys who fought in the two World Wars on the side of England. This posting appeared in 2018 on the website of a distinguished boys' school:

> *On Monday this week SACS trumpeter Zubair Abader had the honour of playing the Last Post and Reveille at the centenary celebrations of the 2 minutes silence at noon introduced during World War One to commemorate those who had fallen up to that point and to pray for those still serving. The impetus for this practice, which caused the whole of Cape Town to come to a complete standstill for the two minutes, came from then Mayor, Sir Harry Hands, with great support from Sir Percy Fitzpatrick, renowned author of 'Jock of the Bushveld'. The idea was exported back to the UK and so impressed the King that he supported its adoption throughout the Empire.* (SACS 2018)

While much has changed over the decades to imbue the old English schools with a South African character, three recent books capture their colonial roots, the durability of their inherited cultures and their distinctive 'Englishness' decades into the country's post-apartheid democracy. Told through the eyes of English school leaders, these books are Keith Richardson's *Before the Wax Melts: Musings of a South African Headmaster* (2018), Bill Schroder's *A Headmaster's Story: My Life in Education* (2019) and Mark Henning's *Two Schools: Transformation and Diversity* (2019). While Henning tells the story of the government school King Edward VII (or KES, as it is popularly known) and the private school St Stithians College (known as Saints), both in Johannesburg, the other two books mainly contain accounts of life inside the Southern Suburbs schools—Rondebosch Boys' High, Westerford High, Rhodes High, Pinelands High (for Schroder) and Wynberg Boys' High School (for Richardson).

One of the most enduring elements of this English school history is the social selection that separates children who 'fit in' to the culture of these established schools from those who do not. Derek Gillard (2008), among other historians, reminds us that 'English society has always been divided on class lines. For centuries such schools as existed catered almost exclusively for the middle and upper classes, and education for the masses was regarded as a dangerous idea.'

As the idea of mass schooling gained hold in the twentieth century, the idea of selection nevertheless remained a powerful factor in determining 'who gets in' to which schools, even when the question of open access seemed to be in vogue (West & Hind 2003). Empire transplanted not only

the concept of the English school to its colonies but, along with it, the idea of social selection, in which class status was built into the very organisation of education (Hawthorne & Bristow 1993:13). In the Cape it was the visiting British astronomer Sir John Herschel, whom Herschel Girls' School was named after, who in the 1930s advanced a plan for the education 'of the lower orders' (Kallaway & Swartz 2016). When some schools of that period found the lower classes growing among their enrolments, '[r]espectable inhabitants [began] to remove their children in significant numbers' (Ludlow 2011:86).

*Respectability* was the watchword in those days that marked the upper classes as worthy of enrolment in public schools. Of a Southern Suburbs school it was remarked that '[t]hose who began to swell the ranks at Wynberg Government School included children of "highly respectable parents" in "straightened circumstances"' (Ludlow 2011:61; see also Ross 1999). Then, as now, those sought-after parents chose schools, but they were also, in turn, chosen by the elite schools through a finely honed, if invisible, process of selection.

## Testing for admissions

Today, the most obvious instrument for social selection is admissions testing. On this matter an elite private girls' school is unapologetic: 'Every girl sits an entrance examination.' The public schools, on the other hand, are coy about testing new applicants. They are not supposed to do admissions testing, and yet many of them do. Section 5(2) of the South African Schools Act (No 84 of 1996) (RSA 1996), restated in the Western Cape Education Department (WCED) Policy for the Management of the Admission and Registration of Learners at Ordinary Public Schools (WCED 2010:5), is clear: 'The governing body of a public school may not administer any test relating to the admission of a learner to a public school, or direct or authorise the principal of the school to administer such a test.'

When pressed, a school will claim that the purpose of a test is placement or to gauge the level of school readiness, and to provide appropriate support. It is difficult to determine whether or not test data is actually used in making selection decisions. In rare cases, a principal would make it clear that they test to select for *English* readiness, since the school does not have the resources to make up for language deficits. Thus, the ability to speak English remains a powerful marker of school readiness, whether or not it is used for selection per se.

Rosenthal Boys' Preparatory School is one such public school that is clear about its practice of selecting for the ability to speak English: 'We don't have the facility to take isiXhosa children and then teach them English and then teach them the curriculum. So, it is also quite a sifting process.' For the principal, however, there is a deeper motivation behind the sifting out of non-English-fluent children, and that is the relationship, as he sees it, between the earning power of the parents and their language abilities: 'Those that can afford [our fees] are linguistically able. So, generally, if the language of the parents is good and [their] children have grown up in that environment [then] there is very little challenge then for paying those fees.' This disturbing connection drawn between social class and English ability as a consideration in admission was surprising, but the principal was undeterred. He was leaving the school shortly, he said, and wanted to say things without fear.

The principal of a fragile middle-class school that had turned black was just as emphatic about English as a measure of inclusion when she related how she communicates with black parents with little capacity in the language:

> *It is useless sending your child to an English school if they can only speak another language. I make that very clear. If you want your kid to come to the school, they actually basically have to be able to communicate in English because we don't have time with the curriculum.*

The form of assessment in this case need not be a formal examination of English competence, but simple observations from interaction with the young child:

> *The parents know that [English is expected], and then all we do with the kid is walk down the passage and we will talk about a picture. And then, shame, you go back and the parents ask how the child did and you say, 'Well, he is very cute but he doesn't understand anything I am saying, because when I pointed to a picture of a cat, your child said "Sipho", and when I asked what colour his jersey is, he said "Sipho"—then how do you think your child is going to survive in this environment?'*

English, therefore, remains one of the vital elements of the assessment process. In the view of most of the schools, ability in English falls under the terms of a crucial paragraph in their admissions policy statements—as the following two almost identical examples from prominent girls' schools demonstrate:

> *Pupils will be considered for enrolment if it is determined that it will be in the pupil's best interest given due regard to the academic standards.*

> *Pupils will be considered for enrolment if it is determined that it will be in the pupil's best interest having given due regard to the school's academic standards.*

These schools do not doubt that the academic standard is maintained by screening for English, even though one of the two schools quoted above seems genuinely perplexed about what it would do if a child without the requisite competence in the language did show up:

> *You know we are an English-speaking school. Um, we have, we haven't had too many situations where we've had to confront that reality, but we have in two cases. Um, they've come from Grade R. It would be a very interesting situation to have a child who can't speak English in maybe one of the higher grades. We'd have to think what to do with them.*

It follows that a child without competence in English would not be admitted to most of the schools in this study. One option is redirection—that is, to send the child elsewhere—as in the case of Gosling Girls' School, where a child applying to enter Grade 1 was sent to the preparatory or preschool to learn English first:

> *We have another child who could speak English but not a lot, and upon questioning we discovered that she wasn't even at a pre-primary school. So, Judy then helped to get that child and urged her to apply to Barkly House and so now [she] is doing extremely well in Grade R.*

This strategy of redirection explains why so many schools prefer to take into their Grade 1 class children who come up through the system via the preschool years. It is in those preparatory years from Grades 000 to 00 to 0 (Grade R) where the values, dispositions and competencies of a child are shaped to make them fit seamlessly into the formal years of schooling. It is not simply skills, but a particular kind of nurturing that makes selection possible; as one principal conceded, 'We prepare them in a certain way'—what he calls 'the [school] standard'.

The puzzle at the heart of assessment in the first grade of formal schooling is how adults make decisions about such small children. This disturbed a former selector in one of the top boys' schools:

> *It's not even six-year-olds anymore; it's now four-year-olds. We look first of all at his behaviour but, I mean, he's four years old! It's a big thing. Parents would always say it is the most nerve-racking thing to go for, that interview, because you know, you can't determine or predict a four-year-old's behaviour. He either sits in the principal's office and does not say a word or he's all over the place, climbing onto the principal's chair, patting him on the head. So how do you decide?*

Yet these schools do have a way of performing social selection, through careful observation and skilful questions, says our selector: 'Can he count to 10? Does he know any songs? What does Dad do with him at home? What chores does he have? You know, just to get a feel for the family. That was quite a determining factor, the interviews.'

However, some schools make a point of the fact that they do not test children for English competence. Royal Primary School is one such school, whose language suggests a broader sense of social inclusion than facility in English alone: 'We accept them as they are.' In this case, however, the school needs all the enrolments it can get; the precipitous decline in numbers in previous years has led to the open-door policy.

On the other hand, Mulberry Girls' School, a more affluent school, makes the same point: 'We don't consider it [language competence] because we have children that started with no English at all.' But it soon becomes clear that the preparation starts long before formal entrance to Grade 1: 'In Grade 00 we've got one little girl who started with no English and she's speaking

beautifully.' These seeming exceptions to the rule of English competence as a means of social selection must therefore be read in the specific context of their application, as these two cases show. A family's facility in English is not unrelated, however, to where they live in the Southern Suburbs.

## Marking the boundaries of privilege

Where families live and where their children attend school are closely linked, and the social status of the school reflects the self-esteem of the community that claims it as its own. Many of the schools use powerful physical descriptors of exclusion as metaphors for marking off the territory that locks in preferred clients and separates out less desirable communities from admission.

Thus, the reference to 'the other side of the railway line' is more than a geographic marker; it refers, for example, to those who live in the cheaper flats of Kenilworth who may compete with wealthier residents for access to Gosling Girls' School. Similarly, when a principal of an elite school boasts about the 'thick fat road behind us', he is referring to a barrier that separates Langa township from middle-class Pinelands. Each school has such geographic markers that serve as handy referents for talking about those outside the zone, for these physical referents are also social markers of who gets in and who is kept out. For Bayside Primary School, it is 'those on the other side of School Road', whereas for Mulberry Girls' School, it is Milner Road that separates Rondebosch East (the mainly coloured middle-class area) from Rondebosch proper.

For the inhabitants of Cape Town, the question 'Where do you live?' reveals a great deal about your social status and standing. Upper Claremont or Bishopscourt places the respondent in an area of high privilege, with access to the most elite schools. Pinelands or Wynberg is still respectable, but they have the ordinary middle-class schools, which are also much less expensive than the schools in Constantia or Newlands. If the respondent mentions Lansdowne or Plumstead, everyone knows that these suburbs are mostly connected to the lower-class former white schools, and there is a good chance that those schools have turned black. And what separates these three classes of former white schools is often territorial markings, such as the name of a separating road or a railway line, as we have seen. Besides class, where a family lives also often determines the extent of their participation in the activities of the school.

## The expectation of participation in the life of the school

'I have no sympathy' with parents who do not participate in school activities, says the principal of a prestigious co-educational school. Her tone suggests that this is a strong consideration in selection—are the parents willing and available to contribute to the life of the school? Instantly, all parents are regarded as equal:

> *All parents work full-time, mothers and fathers generally speaking, so I have no sympathy. We have a lot of committees—building committees, fundraising committee, parents' interest groups, language working groups. Coming here and doing your tuck shop duty once a year is even enough, but you need to commit, and you have to come to the meetings. When I meet with [the parents] I say to them, 'This is my expectation and you're not going to get away with it …'*

There are all kinds of assumptions in this emphatic statement that simply do not hold true, as will be shown later, and yet in virtually every case, the requirement of participation is strong enough to become decisive in admissions decisions.

It is not only parents, however, who are expected to participate in the broader life of the school. For two elite girls' schools, using identical language, an enrolment consideration is 'the school's academic standards and requirements of participation in the sporting and cultural arenas'—this time referring to the students. In this regard, a common refrain among these elite institutions is that 'this is not a stop-and-drop school'. What does this handy phrase mean?

For those schools of the Southern Suburbs that opened their doors to children from outside the feeder zone, 'stop-and-drop' inevitably means that less privileged children have to travel some distance to the school. In the case of working-class students, it means a taxi drops a small or large group of children at the school and then collects them afterwards. For parents who can afford a car, it means travelling through heavy Cape Town traffic to get the young primary school student to school on time. These arrangements invariably led to the disapproving 'stop-and-drop' comment from several principals in the study.

In a focus group discussion with one co-educational school that has turned largely coloured, the remaining white teachers recalled the early years when mothers were a constant presence at the school, working on projects,

from fundraising to school decorations. In those days, mothers of the middle classes—white mothers in this case—were often home-makers and were available to participate in the life of the school. This tradition has been long established at the former white schools, and fathers, too, are called on to help fix things on the grounds or make major donations to the institution. The former white schools feel so strongly about parental participation not only because it makes a difference in school operations, but because they regard it as a distinctive tradition worth upholding.

The problem, of course, is that the world of 'stay-at-home moms' has changed, even in South Africa's patriarchal society. Women of a new generation work as professionals outside the home, including white women. But even as the times have changed for women, racial advantage has not (Gradín 2018). For example, white women, by virtue of the kind of work they do as professionals, have much more flexibility in shaping their working lives to be available to the school, which happens, in most cases, to be around the corner from their homes. So, for example, attending a school meeting at night could literally mean a short ride, if not a walk, to the school gates. Even so, among many wealthy families of the Southern Suburbs a 'leisure mom' is an option in the domestic economy. This is the case at one of the most expensive private girls' schools, as the principal of the primary school reports: 'Moms that offer to be class reps and the moms that are on the PTA [parent–teacher association] in the junior school are the ones that don't have to work. Dads earn enough or run their own businesses and they [the mothers] don't have to work.'

For the few black parents whose children manage to access these schools, such flexibility is usually not available. In the fragile middle-class schools, it is virtually impossible for black parents to be available for school functions or tasks, given the distance from the school and the dangers or unreliability of late-night public transport from the townships. For the lower middle classes, the available jobs come with less autonomy regarding privileges, such as flexible working hours.

The demand for parental participation therefore points to the realities of race and class that could, without any reasons being given by the school, determine whether a child gains access or not. And yet, for middle-class school authorities, a parent dropping off their child and then disappearing flies in the face of the culture and ethos of the school.

The 'stop-and-drop' objection is particularly applicable to children from whom the school expects participation in one or more sports and cultural

activities. These require staying after school, but often taxis are found idling outside the gates as the school bell rings. Once again, for the middle-class children, home is nearby and a nanny or a grandparent could come at the appointed time if both parents are working or not available. The sociology of black lives is, of course, a lot more complicated, for staying after school for activities means that a child gets home late to a dwelling that could be 20 kilometres away from Main Road in the Southern Suburbs, in a township such as Khayelitsha. What the school requires is often unrealistic for working-class and poor students, but these expectations could nevertheless impact admission decisions.

The question of 'stop-and-drop' is particularly pertinent in the case of young children. From as far afield as Milnerton, a working parent has to drive through congested traffic to drop a five- or six-year-old off at school in the Southern Suburbs, only to return to work in a different part of Cape Town during peak hours. At one parent meeting, a black man spoke with emotion about this reality—the sacrifice he has to make to get his child to a posh Claremont school because he cannot afford to live in the area.

Leaders of the elite schools take a dim view of long distances travelled by little children, whether the means of transport is public (such as a taxi and/or the train) or the parent's car. Is it right, the schools ask, to subject small children to such long hours on the road? And what do the exertions of travel do for the quality of a child's learning experiences at the school and their ability to participate after school? Such concerns matter in admissions decisions and are not unrelated, of course, to the class status of the applicants.

## Selecting for occupation and income

In the elite and stable middle-class schools the students look the same. They are dressed immaculately in well-ironed uniforms with elaborate badges and summer caps or floppy hats, with short hair for boys and well-managed hair for girls. For hair there are very precise specifications, as there are for the length of a girl's dress. (It was this insistence on what was seen as a white standard of hair that, in 2016, caused a very public revolt on the grounds of Pretoria High School for Girls in the north of the country and at Sans Souci Girls' School in the south.) Simply by looking across the school campus when the students are outside, the eye perceives a distinctive class of elite students in an elite school with the most impressive facilities for teaching, learning, playing and relaxing.

The parents of these privileged students have high-earning occupations, ranging from the professions to investment bankers, senior accountants and the owners of large companies. However, some of the parents might be teachers, nurses or the leaders of non-governmental organisations (NGOs); when a lower salary pays the fees—such as in the case of single parents or where both parents earn modestly, like a pair of teachers—enormous sacrifices are made to enrol the child in the school. But by and large, the upper-income status of the parents is something broadly shared across the families who enrol their children in these schools, however much institutions seek to include small numbers of individual students on scholarships or through fee exemption.

The high tuition fees, of course, separate out wealthy parents from the rest, as the first and most powerful exclusionary factor in the privileged schools. But it was found that schools employ a range of other instruments to decide on the class status of the family whose child is under consideration for selection. Salary information itself is an important factor, and in this regard most of the schools ask for parental income to be declared up-front on the application form. The question is: Can the parent afford to send their child to the school? In some cases, parents are obliged to provide evidence of stated income in the form of salary slips from their employer. What the schools are doing, in the process, is selecting for social class; income, linked to occupation, is one measure of this. A former school leader from one prestigious boys' school in this study recalls:

> *Occupation was also quite significant. It is almost the first thing you look at, and [you] ask, 'What's your occupation? Can you pay?' I was on the exemption committee. I would say at the most, when I was there, about 10 people would apply for exemption. That's a whole different story, because people tried to take you for a ride as well, but we had financial people sifting through their records. There was a whole process [of] sifting through their records and seeing if they're trying to pull one on us. But no, occupation was a big thing.*

In this respect, the so-called 'non-refundable deposit' can be seen as a test of the financial worthiness of a prospective parent. In some schools, the deposit required exceeds R10 000, and it is not just a test of whether a parent can part with this substantial sum without being refunded, or can wait for seven years

until the child finishes school to receive the money back. The deposit is yet another way of sifting for class status. There are parents who fall at this very first hurdle and do not end up enrolling their child, even if accepted.

Another measure of social class is the profession of the parent(s) applying to the school. This information is gleaned either from the application form or the interview process, or the reputation of a prominent parent would be already known to the school. In this regard, schools are incredibly resourceful in sniffing out profession as a substitute for awkward questions about class, as one parent of a sought-after girls' school explains:

> *Essentially, what they look at is to make sure they are sure about you, because you're supposed to provide your profession and your rates papers and all kinds of stuff to show that you own property. The one thing they use is profession, because that's a guarantee.*

By sifting carefully through information about the profession of a parent, 'a very clean picture emerges. You don't find many motor car mechanics' children attending the school; it's about class', confirms an active parent in the school community.

## Home life and the parents' social standing

Social selection of this kind is also attentive to the question of what kind of home the prospective student comes from, including the parents' relationship and its possible implications for payment, says a parent actively involved in school committees:

> *They also look at if you are a single parent or whether you're married. It speaks to the economic viability of the family, because often schools have a problem where Mommy says, 'Daddy's going to pay' and Daddy says, 'Mommy will pay'. So, to bypass that fight, they prefer going for the stable home.*

Regarding the 'feeling out' of parents by class, an experienced white teacher from a different school confirms that 'the school is looking for a certain kind of parent', whose values, dispositions and interests accord with those of a comfortably elite, middle-class school. How parents talk, where they live, what work they do and who their friendship circles comprise all come

together as signals of that certain kind of parent the school hopes to attract. In this regard, the interview process is an important decider of who gets in and why.

## Social selection based on subjective judgements

Once again, the admissions secretary plays a powerful role in screening for class, a process that can become quite arbitrary, as a former school leader from one of our studied schools remembers:

> *The other determining factor was the lady who received the applications. They were all white in reception. She would form an opinion about the people right away, and she was quite vocal and quite classist. You would hand in your application and she [would say] to the committee that she doesn't think that you would be able to afford the school fees, just based on face value. If she liked you, your chances are better.*

In relation to school policies, the subtleties of selection by class are found in an ensemble of evaluative judgements, most of which are invisible in the decisions of high-in-demand schools. For one principal, it comes down to the photograph—the image of the child presented in the application. In this former 'white school turned coloured', the principal of Zeeman Academy can barely hide his resentment about this kind of social selection and makes it clear that he does the exact opposite, as revealed in this exchange with the interviewers:

> *Principal: I tell our parents that you will see on our application form there is no place for a photo of the child and there's no place for a salary slip. That's because I believe a photo is not necessary when you apply.*
>
> *Interviewer: What's the significance of the photograph?*
>
> *Principal: When you apply, I can have a look at who you are [and] I match the photograph to a salary slip. But why do you need a photograph? Why not just a name? I will never ask for information that I'm not going to be using. I ask for your proof of residence because I need to know where you live in terms of admitting you and I ask for your child's clinic card …*

*Interviewer: But why do other schools ask for a photo?*

*Principal: They need to look at that child and to link it to the salary slip and then make a choice.*

It is unlikely that basing admission on a photograph is widespread across the 30 primary schools in this study, but the fact that this experienced principal so emphatically raised the issue of photographs and income in relation to admissions suggests that it does happen in some institutions. The photograph, however, tells you little about the applicant's behaviour.

## The child's behaviour as a factor in social selection

Unbeknownst to most parents, the receiving school typically sends a questionnaire to the sending school to gain as much information as possible about the child and their family. An examination of such questionnaires reveals that one of the questions the sending school must report on is whether the parents defaulted at any point in paying the school fees. The receiving school might even require a signed statement declaring that fees from the previous year were all paid. This is powerful information that is doubtless used in making decisions about whether the applicant is a reliable parent in terms of fee payments. Whether intended or not, it is also vital data for determining the class of parents.

It is not, however, only financial information that the receiving school requires. It also wants to know about a range of attributes of the child that could assist in making admissions decisions. At least one of the elite schools requires 'a letter of good standing' as part of the student's application; most of the time this kind of reference information is done without the knowledge of the applicant family.

As the principal of Jed Grey Primary School revealed, '[y]ou have to complete a confidential form but we don't send it to the parents; we have to fax or scan directly to the school.' Table 6.1 contains some of the most common questions asked on the forms sent to sending schools.

**Table 6.1:** Questions typically asked on questionnaires sent by elite receiving schools to sending schools before admissions decisions are made

| **Discipline: Has any disciplinary action been taken against the student for the following offences?** | **School fees** | **Social skills (1 = very weak and 5 = excellent)** |
|---|---|---|
| Disruptive in class<br>Insolence<br>Work not done<br>Gang-related activities<br>Books left at home<br>Dealing/taking drugs<br>Vandalism<br>Swearing<br>Smoking<br>Bullying/fighting<br>Truancy | Are the school fees paid to date?<br>Have you experienced difficulties with school fee collection? | Self-control<br>Acceptance of responsibility<br>Interaction with peers<br>Group participation<br>Courtesy<br>Behaviour<br>Respect for superiors<br>Appearance<br>Reliability<br>Problem-solving ability<br>Adherence to code of conduct<br>Leadership skills |

And then, for one school, a Confidential Learner Reference Request reads as follows:

> *The learner's attitude is classified as … [above average, average or below average]*
>
> *Were the learner's parents involved in and supportive of the school? [yes, no]*
>
> *Would the learner be a great/definite/indifferent asset to [the school]?*

The data sought in these character references is not, in the main, about academic results. Nor are the attributes mentioned in the forms linked to progressive ideals, such as critical thinking or creativity or any form of individuality. The downward press of these attributes is towards conformity and obedience, characteristics that comport well with the social class and regnant culture of the receiving school. Hence, questions such as the following

are often asked: Did the sending school have any trouble with the child? Did the child attend school regularly? Did the parents default on payments? Did the child participate in the activities of the school? What is the child really like? These attributes together form a composite image of the ideal child that feeds into the powerful processes of social selection at the receiving school.

Remarkably, such social selection also happens when children are received into preschools and into Grade 1. Consider Figure 6.1, which represents a typical form that a parent must complete for a preschool that sends children to one of the primary schools in this study.

**THE NUTCRACKER PRESCHOOL**
**PERSONAL INFORMATION OF CHILD**

What time does your child go to bed? _____

What time does your child go to sleep? _____

Is your child able to dress him-/herself? _____

With which hand does your child cut, colour, write etc? _____

Has your child attended a crèche/preschool previously? _____

If so, which one? _____

How long has he/she been attending the above school? _____

How will your child travel to school? _____

Does your child need aftercare? _____

Does your child mix easily with other children? _____

Is your child able to play happily on his/her own? _____

What games does your child like to play? _____

Where does he/she play most of the time? _____

Does your child belong to a library? _____

If yes, which one? _____

Does he/she choose his/her own books? _____

Do you read to your child?

❏ Every day ❏ Hardly ever

❏ Sometimes ❏ Never

**Figure 6.1:** An example of a questionnaire that parents must complete upon application to an elite preschool

On the one hand, these questions could be read as seeking practical or logistical information that the school needs for planning purposes. Yet, they could also be read as questions inquiring into the suitability of a family and its child for the school, through questions such as whether there is a book culture in the home and the anticipated form of travel to the school.

Once again, there are principals who buck this trend towards social selection, and for some it is a matter of principle. It should be said, though, that such flexibility is normally found in the schools that have turned black and where the number of students enrolled becomes critical in the survival of the school. The head of Jed Grey Primary School is proud of her record in dismissing social selection of the kind found in the more elite and stable middle-class schools:

> *A child withdrew and then the next person on the list was this little boy, and the principal (of the sending school) said, 'You chose the naughtiest child.' And I said, 'No, he was next on my list.' I realised he was also weak, but then you sit with your own dilemma, your integrity. I could have skipped him and nobody would have known except me. But then you sit with that [dilemma]. I am waiting to meet Troy; apparently, he is going to be a challenge.*

In the same way, the principal of Redding Primary School bucks the trend in social selection and chooses children who come with disabilities of various kinds, such as Asperger's syndrome, because of an explicit commitment to inclusion beyond the normative standards of most elite or middle-class schools.

It is one thing to deny admission to a child based on a profile of inappropriate social behaviour. But part of the culture of these established schools is also to reward 'good' behaviour. Most schools have elaborate year-end ceremonies to reward academic excellence, in the main, but also to honour social attributes such as courage, compassion, leadership, care and the ability to get along well with others. Good neighbourliness and personal example come up often. There is a special category on awards night for these kinds of qualities.

At one of the most elite schools, a well-travelled story in the Southern Suburbs is that the girls each receive a string of pearls on graduating from high school. This of course does not go unnoticed at a rival girls' school, which seemed to lament the loss of enrolments to the pearl-awarding school:

> *We lost girls who went to Highlands. Now there are reasons for that, water polo being one of them, which at the moment is a big thing. But also the parents think it's better because they are paying a whole lot more and it is different, their values have changed. And their dinner parties are talking about the fact that matrics get a string of pearls at Highlands. Spruce doesn't give them pearls … so we lose some.*

It is, however, at the point of entry into these Southern Suburbs schools where non-preferred students are already eliminated on the basis of social class. One particularly painful story concerns a highly successful student from Royal Primary School, who by any measure would have been a certain admission to the neighbouring Pinelands High School. As one of the experienced teachers at Royal Primary recalls:

> *We had a fabulous head girl in 2014 and she applied for the high school and she didn't get in. She was living in Langa and we actually contacted the high school and asked whether we can draw up a motivation for the school to accept her. It [the exclusion] literally was the fact that she was living with her grandmother and they [the school] were not sure of financial support.*

## The struggle to make students 'fit in'

All of these fine-tuned measures associated with social selection have one goal in mind, and that is to ensure that the incoming student 'fits in' to the culture, class and values of the school. Cases in which an individual black student does not fit in are raised as cautionary tales, as it emerged in this account by teachers at an elite boys' school: 'We chose to take a little boy who had not had all these opportunities and he had massive challenges. We've got our education support unit and brought in an extra teacher to come and help us to manage the stresses he's feeling.'

In this case, the problem is located within 'the little boy' and not in the social arrangements of this prestige school. The boy does not 'fit in', despite absorbing additional resources from the school, and this expense is something schools consciously take into consideration in deciding who gets in or not. As the principal of a co-educational school calculates, 'There's always expenses when you become inclusive.' Rather than see the added

support as an investment in student growth and development—as is the case for white students with learning difficulties—it is now a load the school has to bear, as in the case of 'the little boy'. 'So we're not scared to take on that burden,' says the leader of that boys' school, 'we just want to make sure that at the end of the day we're doing what is best for each individual child.' By individualising the problem around a specific case of a black student, the school then justifies the need for caution and the utility of selecting for 'fit', given that 'we have made those mistakes in the past'.

In the treatment of the struggling black child from the townships as a cautionary tale, the school nevertheless makes distinctions of class among black students in the former white school based on fit. The middle-class black students

> *[s]eemingly fitted in … they assimilated. They would start at pre-primary or Grade 1 and I don't think there were any real problems. So on the surface they adjusted just fine; they fitted in. They were academically good, behaviourally good, <u>just like the rest</u>* [emphasis added].

Such calculation about social class extends to the ability to afford an elite education. Therefore, it makes no sense, in the view of some of the top schools, to manage a child through the primary school who cannot continue into high school because of a lack of means; again, there is an individual story to justify early decisions to 'select out' those who do not fit the class: 'We've got a boy to Grade 7 through a lot of energy. Ready to go to high school, but no high school was prepared to fund him because there was no funding guaranteed going right through.'

## Status projection and elite schools

Social selection, as the principal of Bayside Primary School sees it, intertwines class and race in the ways schools choose their families and families choose their schools. In this regard a school with higher fees and more prestige is viewed as the better school, and it is also usually the one with more white students, as expressed by this teacher:

> *White seems to be better because they charge a little bit more fees. Income bracket and obviously class play a role [in where parents go]. When I say class, obviously [I mean] the fact that it is better when I mix with whiter people. So I do think that money plays a role [and] dare I say it that among coloured people there is also the belief that white is better for that reason.*

As discussed in this chapter, individuals are selected by class and culture for admission to the elite schools of the Southern Suburbs. And the ability of a school to project such a privileged image of itself is an important part of the attraction of a Southern Suburbs institution. In other words, a school must not only attract the right kind of students, it must 'select in' those preferred families and their children to sustain the image it has cultivated for itself.

The physical facilities of a school have always formed a vital part of its marketing strategy. Way back in the nineteenth century, it was said of certain Cape schools that because they did not have 'suitable school buildings, properly furnished … the schools never realised the prestige formed of them. They had no respectability about them' (Ludlow 2011:89).

The surrounding mountains and oceans of the greater Cape Town area are represented from different angles on the websites of each institution. This is no different from images of residential housing in the City Bowl or Southern Suburbs, where Table Mountain or Devil's Peak, the False Bay coastline or the Atlantic Seaboard offer impressive backdrops to the purchasing price.

Beyond the natural beauty of the surrounding environment, the investment in physical facilities is critical to a school's status projection. The standard fare is the swimming pool, the water polo pool, the hockey fields, and the rugby and cricket fields, as well as the clubhouse and small stadium where parents and alumni gather to watch sporting events. A Tartan Track for athletics, an AstroTurf surface for hockey or a new media room all count in terms of image projection. That is why interested parents are often taken for a walk across the school grounds, to convey a message about image and status.

Such an impressive physical plant must be maintained, but also constantly expanded to signal that a school is attentive to new developments, such as in science and technology. The successful parents at the elite institutions buy not only an academic education but the whole package that gives an education from Herschel Girls' School or Bishops Diocesan College

a completely different meaning, in both the labour market and in high society, than what is achieved on paper in an ordinary middle-class school.

This differentiation of the former white schools by class is familiar to every principal, teacher, parent and student. They know who 'the snobs' or 'brand schools' are, but they also know the ordinary middle-class schools and which ones to avoid—the very fragile former white schools that are turning or have already turned black. The class hierarchy of schools is well established in the Southern Suburbs. The desire to move from one tier of schools to the next lies behind the competitive impulses of parents to move up the social ladder of school and society. And nothing impresses parents more than the school infrastructure, starting at the school gates.

The security guards—all black—are immaculately dressed and convey a sense of safety and security that includes a careful screening of the incoming guests. The guards might have impressive guardhouses in the more elite schools and require visitors to be signed in before being allowed onto the—often expansive—property and guided to the correct parking slots. The arrangements at the gates form part of the cultivation of a positive perception of the school in the eyes of parents.

After visitors are waved through to the main administration building, there is inevitably some time to wait. They are surrounded by prestigious awards and other forms of recognition that the school has enjoyed. Black-and-white photographs of academic classes, but also of sporting and cultural teams, from decades ago decorate the walls. There is a profound sense of history, of culture and of achievement that is projected to impress the guests. The very design of the entrance hall, with its puffed-up cushions, is meant to project the status and standing of the school.

The projection of social status is not only seen; it is felt. It is not only one thing, but the combination of powerful elements on display (the trophies in the waiting room, the water polo pool on the drive through the estate, the many stairs rising sharply upwards to the entrance doors) that convey a felt sense of who the school is for. Working-class parents who missed the early signposts and nevertheless made an appointment to see the admissions officer will soon begin to feel like intruders in the waiting room.

## Conclusion

The problem with social selection is that it is difficult to challenge because of its invisibility in the admissions process, and yet it remains a powerful

instrument of inclusion and exclusion in the former white schools. It is made even harder for parents to contest decisions based on social selection, given that the principal is often the final arbiter of *who gets in*.

Social selection is nevertheless intellectually fascinating, because the attributes that mark class respectability are opaque and yet so consequential in the lives of families and their children. In this regard it is crucial to understand that the discretionary power of the principal and the opaque nature of social selection are not accidents or due to a failure to 'spell out' the criteria for access. As the most extensive study yet on the subject has argued, discretion and opacity are often cornerstones of admissions policies: '… discretion so that gatekeepers would be free to do what they wished and opacity so that how they used their discretion would not be subject to public scrutiny' (Karabel 2005:2).

Social selection is, however, a gratuitous instrument of control over admissions when a former white school turns black. This process is discussed in the next chapter.

# CHAPTER 7

# The Problem of Resegregation: Why and How White Schools Turn Black

*I can match them academically, but I cannot compete against whiteness.*

—Principal of a former white school that became a coloured-majority school

## Introduction

Situated in the heart of an expensive suburb, Clinton Primary School is a former white school that is hard to explain. According to form, this should be a school that, like all the other stable middle-class and elite schools, retained its predominantly white student clientele in an area where, historically, the racial enrolment of the school corresponded to the residential patterns of suburban housing. If the school did 'turn black', it should have become, like some in the Southern Suburbs, a predominantly coloured school, given the racial and ethnic demographics of Cape Town's metropolitan areas. And yet this particular school has predominantly black *African* students. How did Clinton Primary follow this unique path to resegregation?

Within walking distance of the beautiful coastline of False Bay is another former white, English-medium school in a sought-after neighbourhood. While there is still a dwindling number of white students at Marigold Primary School, it has, for all practical purposes, become an emphatically coloured school, even though many of the teachers are still white and few of the students live in the immediate area. What explains the peculiar path towards resegregation at Marigold Primary that is so different from Clinton Primary, both situated along Main Road?

Grassville Primary School is set in an impressive location in the shadow of the famous Newlands Cricket Ground, which can only mean that this institution served white students and employed white teachers in the apartheid era. With every major cricket match or rugby competition in Newlands (the rugby stadium is also within walking distance), Grassville

Primary opens its gates for parking and makes significant amounts of money from the casual parking fees. Yet this is now also a majority-coloured school in the centre of affluent Claremont, for reasons different from the forces that turned Marigold and Clinton primary schools into majority-black schools. Why?

This chapter is concerned with patterns of resegregation in the former white schools of the Southern Suburbs. While many of the schools remain white-dominant in student enrolments, and some have become reasonably integrated, there is a subset of former white schools that have turned black, for reasons that are not well studied or understood. What makes this research unique is that it is the first study of the micropolitics of resegregation at school level in contexts where white students are the minority population in relation to black children. In the broader context of this book, the main reason for studying resegregated schools is that it is impossible to understand why many schools remain predominantly white without understanding the problem relationally—that is, how nearby schools turn black.

## A question of founding origins

One of the most important reasons for resegregation has to do with why the school was established in the first place. In other words, how and where a school was founded has a predictive impact on the post-apartheid enrolments of that school by race and class.

Consider Zeeman Academy in the Retreat/Bergvliet area of Cape Town. For many years this was an all-white school, established to serve the needs of lower-middle-class white Afrikaans families from the area. These were certainly not wealthy white people. In fact, the feeder families to the school were typically white people who worked as 'railway *boere*' (a term commonly used in those days) on the suburban railway line. From the area around the school, the white railway workers could take a short walk to the station and start their work as ticket takers or train drivers. In those days, job reservation meant that white railway personnel from the lower classes benefited from 'affirmative action' by being shielded from competition with black workers from the area. Their houses were simple and standard red-bricked structures in an area reserved for whites. One side of Main Road provided access to work at the railway station, while the other side of the same road offered enrolment at what was then Zeeman Primary School.

In those days, for lower-class white Afrikaners who did not find work on the railway lines, there was another option a few kilometres away in nearby Tokai—Pollsmoor Prison. At that time most of the prison warders were white Afrikaans speakers. Here too, salaries were modest, but they enabled a relatively good life because income was differentiated according to race and thus white employees were afforded a higher standard of living than most black workers. The warders, too, would enrol their children at Zeeman Primary, since it was so close to their workplace.

Then came 1994 and, in an instant, everything changed. The new democratic government introduced a policy of 'employment equity', which was vigorously applied in the public sector. The railways and the prisons felt the impact immediately, as black (coloured and African) staff displaced white and, in this context, Afrikaans employees. Since the white staff were, in the main, lower-middle-class personnel who lived in low-cost housing, their residences were taken up by mainly coloured homebuyers, changing the racial demographics of these areas almost instantly. The white people left the area for the Northern Suburbs, mainly, and both the employer organisations and the residences around these particular schools became predominantly coloured.

The chain of events can be summarised in this way: the change in the government led to changes in employment, which, in turn, sparked changes in the housing market that impacted school enrolments. In other words, coloured families, in the main, now occupied nearby residences and accessed employment in the public and private sector organisations in and beyond the residential area.

Still, the question remains as to why Zeeman Academy, like the former white schools mentioned earlier in this chapter, would change so radically, compared to its counterparts in the leafier suburbs. There are two reasons. On grounds of proximity to the school alone, the new families could legitimately make the claim that they fell within the catchment areas of the educational institutions, thereby removing one of the most potent discriminators employed by the more elite former white schools. Then, since this school traditionally served lower-middle-class white families, the fees were much more affordable for non-white families. Fees, in other words, could not be used to exclude black working-class families from the former white area or the coloured neighbourhoods on the other side of the railway line.

Both of these factors need to act in tandem for a school to turn black—residential proximity and the affordability of the fees. One example illustrates

the difference. Peakrest Primary School has relatively affordable fees for the middle-class coloured and African parents who work at the giant insurance firm Old Mutual in Pinelands. The school, however, holds firm that only families who physically reside in the area will be considered for admission, thereby excluding most Old Mutual employees. Even though Pinelands has growing numbers of coloured families, it is still predominantly white, and in this way the school has retained its majority demographic to a large extent.

Highlands Girls' School, by contrast, is surrounded by coloured, and some African, families occupying the more affordable flats and houses of Claremont, but its fee structure is among the highest of the elite schools in the country. Parents do apply, but then shock at the high fees discourages them from pursuing a place at the school for their daughters. Residence in the school's catchment area is not enough where socioeconomic strata *within* the feeder zone enable only wealthier parents to gain admission to the school. As a result, Highlands Girls' remains a predominantly white school nestled in a leafy suburb of Cape Town.

Less well known than elite schools such as Highlands Girls' are the Southern Suburbs institutions that were created for poor white families. Warrington Preparatory School was 'a white school, but incredibly mixed', even at the height of apartheid. It was as if the authorities did not care about this poor English school, and so, provided nobody made a fuss about the non-white children on the premises, Warrington seemed to get away with their mixed enrolments. Coming into the democratic era after 1994, this poor-white school with minimal school fees was bound to be vulnerable to becoming an all-black school for another reason as well—it is situated on a major public transport route running through the lower-middle-class suburb of Lansdowne. In fact, this road winds down directly from a major township: 'My parents tell us that Gugulethu is close to Lansdowne, that we are on the bus route,' says the white principal. Proximity to public transport routes came to play a critical role in some former white schools turning black.

## Proximity to public transport routes or townships

'We are Strandfontein relocated,' says the principal of Marigold Primary School, with some exasperation, towards the end of a lengthy interview. Marigold Primary is a former white school that is located at the intersection of all the major local public transport facilities. Main Road, which runs through the Southern Suburbs, literally passes by the east side of the school

grounds. Across the road is a station for the suburban train line. Minibus taxis can run straight from Khayelitsha, past Strandfontein, towards the school. On the other side of the wetlands lie Capricorn and Lavender Hill, densely populated coloured areas. When 1994 came, black parents who could afford the fees made arrangements for their children to relocate from the schools in the township to Marigold Primary.

Sometimes parents make their own arrangements with private companies to transport their children to and from Marigold Primary in minibus taxis. This creates all kinds of problems for the school, including chronic tardiness because of unreliable private providers, or overcrowded taxis. But the net result is that these transport facilities bring more and more black students into the school, transforming its racial profile. For the coloured principal of Marigold Primary, who also held that position at Strandfontein Primary School, enabling access to Marigold Primary for students from these outlying areas is a matter of conscience: 'Come on, if you live in Lost City (an area of Tafelsig, Mitchells Plain), are you telling me that's it? You're a goner? We can't have that kind of thing. There must be opportunities.'

A white school that is turning black does not, however, require a public transport network to bring children to the gates of the institution. In the case of Royal Primary School, an accident of history placed the school next to prominent townships: 'A lot of children came from Kensington, Maitland, which are just over the bridge and since we were the school closest to the railway line, it was easy for children from the location areas to get to the school.' However, the mere physical proximity of a former white school to nearby black townships is not sufficient on its own to turn the school black. Also required are accessible fees and declining white enrolments. In cases such as that of Royal Primary, diminishing numbers even before 1994 meant that the school was forced to take on any students, which the end of apartheid allowed them to do.

It does not help when the vulnerable school is an Afrikaans school surrounded by English-language schools and communities; for such schools, the pressure to change race and language demographics is significant.

## Language pressures

Most Afrikaans schools along the Southern Suburbs line were established to give a home-language option to the children of white Afrikaans-speaking families. Such was the case with the establishment of Laerskool Steph Stodel

(founded in 1928) on a hill in English-speaking Wynberg. Above it sits the prestigious Spruce Girls' School, a private Catholic school, and below it the old Wynberg English schools. During the apartheid era, Steph Stodel served Afrikaans-speaking families from the nearby Wynberg military base, which employed white Afrikaner personnel. At one time, this small school with one classroom per grade was sufficient to serve that community. Now, with the military transformed since 1994, the school's numbers are down.

This was also the case with Laerskool Pieter Voud, which offered education to the children of navy families down the road in Simon's Town, when the naval base there was dominated by Afrikaans-speaking white people. It was a relatively easy drop-off and pick-up school for parents living in the area and working in the surrounding whites-only residential suburbs. Then came 1994, and as the racial profile of navy personnel changed under the pressure of transformation, there was no longer a reason for white children to attend this school. White parents moved to other parts of the Cape for employment or enrolled their children in other white-dominant Afrikaans schools.

The key to understanding these primary schools, though, is that because they served white Afrikaans families in predominantly English-speaking white neighbourhoods, the schools were necessarily small and always had limited enrolments. This was true for Pieter Voud as it was for Steph Stodel. In this context, any small changes in the race and language demographics of the school would lower the numbers to the point that it made the school vulnerable to closure or a change of language policy.

After 1994, there was no longer a white Afrikaner National Party government to defend these schools with their small and declining numbers. Now, with a black government in place, the pressure is on to find students to keep the school from being shut down or forced to change into a bilingual or English-medium school. The principals of both schools are painfully aware of their precarious situation.

So, what do vulnerable schools do? They begin actively to recruit coloured Afrikaans-speaking students from the surrounding areas—often townships—in order to keep the school Afrikaans-medium, to retain their teacher numbers and even to ensure the school itself survives. The principal of Pieter Voud shares openly the fact that he recruits coloured students from the nearest coloured township, Ocean View, whose promising name belies the poverty and violence of the area:

> *I went to Ocean View; there's a person working there who goes onto the streets and collects children who do not go to school. I took in a lot of those kids. Taking in those learners, I've got no problem. They are Afrikaans speaking [but it] comes with a lot of responsibility and a lot of baggage which I don't have the people for [but] I make a plan; we do make a plan.*

Sometimes he takes on children who have no Afrikaans at all—parents give misleading information—but the school works hard to build their confidence in the language.

What bedevils the efforts of these principals determined to keep their schools Afrikaans-medium is that, as the school diversifies student enrolments, it is the white teachers and middle-class parents who move to other schools. In this respect, the more esteemed Laerskool Joos Adam is the 'go-to' school for well-off Afrikaans parents. Slowly, the drift of Afrikaans-speaking parents with financial means erodes the majority-white enrolments of the smaller, less affluent schools trying to hold on to their language of instruction.

There is, however, another reason why Afrikaans parents move from these stand-alone Afrikaans schools such as Laerskool Pieter Voud and Steph Stodel, and that is the need to guarantee their children security of passage from primary to high school. In the competitive race for the few Afrikaans-medium high schools in the Southern Suburbs, it makes sense to enrol a child in primary school at Laerskool Joos Adam, which leads automatically to admission to the nearby high school of the same name. This kind of decision can come with some sacrifice, given that the distances parents have to travel can be significant. Thus, parents make calculations about assured admissions in this way, but for the smaller Afrikaans primary schools, the effect is to further drain their little educational sites not only of overall enrolments but also of white students from the middle classes.

If 1994 required the end of racially exclusive enrolments in white schools, these Afrikaans schools are waiting for the other political shoe to drop. What they are not sure about is the direction of the coming change—closure or change in the medium of instruction? One thing they know for sure is that if the school remains open it will gradually turn black, as in the case of Grassville Primary School.

## Language transitions

There is another set of white Afrikaans schools that turned black overnight. In these cases, there was no prolonged struggle to hold on to the Afrikaans-language students as there is in the small white schools. In fact, Grassville Primary School and Zeeman Academy quickly turned from all-white Afrikaans schools to mainly coloured schools with comparatively large student numbers. The reason for this dramatic shift was the pressure on these schools to change their language policy.

At first, the schools tried to hold on to Afrikaans, and some of them then experimented with parallel-medium classes (English and Afrikaans classes running separately), but eventually they gave in to the demand for English coming from families in the surrounding areas. The principals of the existing majority-white Afrikaans schools express their disappointment at these developments, including the loss of a treasured language. But there was also the loss of white enrolments, as the flight continued to schools such as Joos Adam.

There is, however, a puzzle at the heart of the resegregation of the transition schools. Why would they lose Afrikaans, given the fact that many coloured families in Cape Town speak Afrikaans as home language? Why did coloured enrolments not translate into more Afrikaans enrolments of white and black students sharing a common language? Would this otherwise reasonable expectation of language dynamics in the Cape not have kept these schools 'Afrikaans'? In a perfect world, yes. But something else was happening in the coloured community of Cape Town, in contrast to the rural areas of the Western Cape, and that was the tendency among families over many years to seek out English schools. An experienced principal of a former coloured school recounts an exchange with a parent:

> *Principal: But why do you want your child in the English class? Don't you speak Afrikaans at home?*
>
> *Parent:* Ja, by die huis praat ons Afrikaans, maar by die skool, Engels! *(True, at home we do speak Afrikaans, but at school, English!)*

It is difficult to pin down single or simple reasons for such language shifts among coloured families (Anthonissen 2013). It could be that Afrikaans-speaking parents pursue English because of a sense of upward social mobility associated with the language. The politics and economics of the country are

conducted in English, unlike in the apartheid years. It might be because of the prestige that the English language enjoys among coloured families. And it does not carry the political baggage of Afrikaans, a language that many coloured families still regard with contempt as the language of the oppressor that was forced down the throats of black people in the mid-1970s. It could be one or a combination of these reasons, but what we do know is that coloured people showed up at the doors of schools such as Grassville Primary School and Zeeman Academy demanding instruction in English.

As more and more coloured students entered these schools, and as the language shifted, so the white Afrikaans-speaking families took their children to other schools in the city, but also to the Northern Suburbs, where there is a larger concentration of Afrikaans schools. The interplay in these cases between race and language is a powerful explanation of how white schools turned black. It was not simply white flight in reaction to the changing racial enrolments of the school; it was, for some parents, also the shift in language medium. And in this case of language transition, as with language pressures and the integration of the suburbs, what one school lost in white enrolments another school gained— as at Royal Primary School.

## How some former white schools depend on others to stay majority white

Royal Primary School used to be the 'go-to' school in the area. It was, after all, the very first Pinelands school (founded in 1927), located in 'Champagne Pinelands'. White parents sent their children to Royal Primary as a matter of course. Then, small changes in Royal Primary saw a drift of children to Redding and Peakrest primary schools. For one thing, new parents increasingly moved to the areas around Redding and Peakrest in 'the cheaper end of the area'. And Royal Primary was located in an ageing community; this too precipitated a fall in enrolments.

At the same time that Royal Primary was losing numbers, 1994 happened and all schools opened up to children of all races. The problem for Royal Primary was that by this time the school desperately needed a boost in enrolments. The dilemma for this former white school was that those new numbers were coming from the adjacent townships of Factreton, Windermere and Kensington. By a fluke of history, Royal Primary had been built in close proximity to a major transport route, which included taxi hubs and the railway line. After students disembarked, it was a relatively short

walk to the school that was once the most prestigious among the three Pinelands institutions. With the need for enrolments and the advance of a less affluent clientele, fees were kept low, and as coloured and some black African students came in, the remaining white families sought out Redding and Peakrest primary schools. Today Royal Primary School is majority black.

Events at Royal Primary also did not improve the situation. The school went through a major crisis when a principal was accused of fraud, and this became known throughout the small residential community. The reputational damage was great, and the school struggled to regain its academic reputation, just as it lost its earlier diversity because of white flight in the direction of the other two primary schools. The original white community school is no longer the school of choice for white parents, or for that matter, the black middle classes. In a perverse way, though, the fate of Royal Primary School enables Peakrest Primary to continue as a predominantly white school and Redding Primary to maintain a stable enrolment of white students.

It is this relationship between a triad of former white schools that offers fascinating insights into their interdependency when it comes to race and enrolments. Royal Primary School 'fed' its white students to Redding and Peakrest, thereby giving them a secure flow of white enrolments. Peakrest Primary, and to some extent Redding Primary, can only sustain their white enrolments to the extent that parents now consciously decide to limit their options to these two schools. In the process, their admissions policies change to capture the new realities. Royal Primary now enrols the children of Old Mutual employees without restriction, since the school needs the enrolment numbers, but Peakrest Primary, which enjoys a steady demand for places from Pinelands residents—white and coloured in the main—can afford to exclude parents who work at the insurance company. If Peakrest's enrolment figures dropped for any reason, this policy would likely change. But for now, Peakrest can survive as a majority-white school precisely because Royal Primary has not.

In the middle of these two primary schools—Royal and Peakrest—sits Redding Primary School, which has managed to sustain a diversity of students in a former white school. Redding Primary is in many ways a model of school integration. But it too could only achieve that mid-point status with respect to integration because white parents flocked to it, allowing it to retain a visibly white clientele, while black parents were absorbed into Royal Primary, making it all black.

Redding Primary became an exemplary school through a combination of leadership commitment and parent support, which enables this institution to balance black and white enrolments, as well as staff diversity, in ways not possible at Royal Primary and not pursued at Peakrest Primary. If there had been no Peakrest Primary, it is quite reasonable to conclude that Redding Primary would have remained a majority-white school for the Pinelands area, given local demand. The point is that the racial enrolments of one school are determined in part by what is possible in the neighbouring schools.

This relationship between schools whose racial profiles depend on each other plays out in similar ways in the Bergvliet area, which lies further south in the Southern Suburbs. Before 1994, white parents typically had to choose between Bayside, Kingstone and Sierra primary schools. Then, as now, the status hierarchy among these three schools was known to all parents. Bergvliet was originally established as a place of residence for families of men returning from the war. These ex-servicemen were not wealthy, but as white people under apartheid they could afford the modest middle-class homes of this very southern area of Cape Town. Bayside Primary became the affordable school for children of families in the immediate area. It was a comfortable middle- to lower-middle-class school for white English parents.

Everybody knew that it was a step up the social ladder if you could get your child into Kingstone Primary School. As a newer housing development, the homes in the area around the school were generally more expensive and the clean, neatly laid-out suburb was much more attractive to the eye; the school fees at Kingstone Primary reflected this enhanced status. As a result, parents with more money placed their children in this school. Since fees and race are highly correlated, the higher-fee Kingstone Primary became the majority-white school while the lower-fee Bayside Primary became the majority-coloured school.

Sierra Primary School, on the other hand, is further away and has the highest status among this triad of primary schools. If a white parent could afford to migrate from Bayside Primary, Kingstone Primary was the next choice, but if that family was wealthy enough, Sierra Primary was the ideal choice. To this day, it is the 'whitest' of the three schools. Kingstone Primary remains a majority-white school because of the movement of parents from Bayside Primary and other areas; Sierra Primary remains a white-dominant school because parents come there from the other two schools, among others. It is known as *the* elite school in the triad.

In the case of Bayside Primary, the school turned black in part because of the socioeconomic status of the immediate area, relative to that of Kingstone Primary, which is in a more expensive area, and Sierra Primary, located in a very expensive suburb. But Bayside Primary School is also near to coloured suburbs. When talking to the teachers and principal of this school, Heathfield (and to some extent Retreat) come up often as the middle-class coloured areas on the other side of Main Road cutting through the Southern Suburbs. The proximity to these areas invariably means greater demand from non-white families, and as enrolments from these areas increased, white flight kicked in—to the benefit of Kingstone and Sierra primary schools.

Once again, what sustains these majority-white schools is the fact that another once-white school in the same broad area has turned black. In this shuffle between schools, though, it is always the interaction between race and class that more fully explains the enrolments of the triad of schools. And there is no more convincing demonstration of how this happens than determining which school the children of the school principal attend.

## Issues of race and class: The example of coloured principals

None of the former white schools in this study are exclusively (100 per cent) white. Since 1994, there have always been small if negligible numbers of black students in the elite and stable middle-class schools. In the more established of the former white schools, one source of those minor enrolments are the children of coloured professionals, such as the principals of former white schools.

In recent years, as part of the pressure for transformation, several former white schools in the Southern Suburbs—at all three class levels: fragile middle-class, stable middle-class and elite schools— have appointed coloured principals. In all these cases, the principals of non-elite schools send their children to schools one or more class levels up. When pressed on the matter, the coloured principals of the 'white schools turned black' were clearly uneasy about the fact that their children were not enrolled in the schools they led. If they were so enrolled, this might have meant a reduction on the fees and, of course, easy transport arrangements before and after school. As the principal of Bayside Primary School reports: I'm a little embarrassed to say this at this point that I'm also a parent at Sierra Primary. My kids have been there for 11 years. Joshua will go to Grade 12

next year and Hannah will be Grade 7 next year.' Similarly, the coloured principal of the former white Zeeman Academy also acknowledges that while his son started at this now-coloured school, the family applied to several 'whiter' (at the time) schools: Bayside Primary, Rosenthal Boys' Preparatory School and Richmond Primary School. They all accepted the boy, but his parents ended up enrolling him on an 85 per cent scholarship at Richmond Primary, one of the most expensive of the elite schools in the Southern Suburbs.

It is clear from this study that principals, as middle-class professionals, also have class ambitions, and so they send their children to a 'better' school. How do they justify their decisions? Most times, they cannot do so, other than to offer the simple fact that their aspirations for their children lie beyond the black schools they lead. Sometimes, they make the point that they want their children to learn in more racially diverse environments than what their own former white schools provide. At other times, they argue that it is not good for a child to be in the same school as their parent/s. But the main reason is that the other schools are perceived as having stronger academic reputations, often associated with the dominant demographic of the school (white) and the more impressive physical infrastructure and extra-curricular programmes.

When schools turn black, in other words, it is almost always for a particular class of black student—those from the lower middle classes and working-class communities. Teachers and principals send their children elsewhere as well, as in the case of the smaller Afrikaans schools, but also the larger English-medium schools. What this means is that the majority-white schools also have class majorities in that their students come from a particular stratum of the broader society—those who can afford the fees, who live in the area and who demonstrate the kinds of dispositions that enable them to fit into the school (see Chapter 6). Turning black, in other words, means that the school often turns black in ways that reflect not only a changing race profile but also sediments a lower class status within the school. Except in one case.

Southerns Primary School also turned from an all-white school in suburban Wetton into a coloured school, but with an upward shift in the class status of the community. During the apartheid years Wetton provided housing to lower-middle-class white people, some of whom were employees at Youngsfield, the military base nearby. The principal recalls:

> *We served a community of low- to middle-income families, so we didn't have the very rich. When the Group Areas Act went, we got some very affluent people coming into the area who started to come to the school as well. We had a better class group coming in from that time onwards than from perhaps when we had just the white community.*

This is significant because of where Wetton is located. Apartheid-era white Wetton was surrounded by middle-class coloured areas, including parts of Lansdowne, Rondebosch East, Penlyn and Belthorn. In these areas lived coloured teachers, lecturers, architects and surveyors who could easily have afforded the modest but comfortable middle-class homes of Wetton were it not for the residential segregation enforced by the Group Areas Act (No 41 of 1950). When this barrier fell, it was this class stratum that moved in as the lower-middle-class whites fled to the Northern Suburbs.

However, while economically Southerns Primary School experienced an upward swing in its class fortunes as far as most parents were concerned, racially it had evolved into a predominantly coloured school with a mere sprinkling (3 per cent) of whites. These finer discriminations in the ways the schools of the Southern Suburbs turn black could easily be missed at places such as the former white Clinton Primary School.

## A special case of resegregation: Clinton Primary School

Since the founding of Clinton Primary School in 1892, it has always been a special kind of school. Its first principal apparently launched the Scouts Movement from what was originally a one-man, one-classroom school. The school had the first of many woodwork centres, and other schools came to use the facilities. It is perhaps this fact that transformed the school into a practical school for children regarded as being less able intellectually. It is an organisational stigma that Clinton Primary has never outgrown. The principal's sense of the history of the school is as follows:

> *Clinton Primary's children were not academically strong [like those] in schools [such as] Gunter Primary and other schools in the area. Children were sent to Clinton Primary because the school offered a sort of practical strength where there were a number of special classes … and they had things like woodwork and needlework to incorporate the children in the syllabus.*

To this day, Clinton Primary is the only school among the 30 studied that has separate classes for children who struggle academically. It is euphemistically called 'a resourced class', which is actually 'the old adjustment class where children with learning difficulties are placed by the district at the school'. Put differently, Clinton Primary has become the 'go-to school' for struggling children as far as the entire school district is concerned, as the principal confirmed:

> *Those children have been taken out of the mainstream class[es], not only [in] our school but the district; so the children are recommended to go [to Clinton Primary]. So they are usually admitted [to Clinton Primary] at around 10 years old and then usually leave around 14, and then they apply and are admitted to special schools, schools like Batavia. So they go there but they are part of the school and they are part of the programme although they are in their own class.*

This former white school, perceived as one for slower students, was therefore bypassed by both middle-class white and black parents in favour of the prestigious academic schools such as Gunter Primary and Highlands Girls' School, or even the 'white school turned coloured' which is literally around the corner, Grassville Primary School. As the principal recalls:

> *We have a number of domestic workers who seek placement for their children. When those domestic workers come for an interview they are accompanied by their employers and [in] the few minutes I speak to them I find that those employers have children of school-going age, but they are going to other schools in the area. And so this is not a school of their choice.*

Clinton Primary School did not, therefore, become black because of its low fees or a change in language policy or as a result of a change in the surrounding community. Its status as a school for slower students was the overriding factor in explaining how the school became black African—white and coloured parents avoided the school. As the principal of nearby Gunter Primary School confides:

> *We find that sort of status thing comes in, because you will find a white family, for example, that stays two roads away from Clinton Primary, but they don't want to [go there]. So then my question was always to them, 'Are you looking for a school for your child or are you looking for Gunter Primary?'*

What requires further explanation, however, is how Clinton Primary School became specifically black African; put differently, why did middle-class or working-class coloured parents also avoid the school?

One reason seems to be the fact that Clinton Primary took on many children of African domestics working in the area, and since the school was also close to the suburban train line, it was within walking distance of public transport. As the school filled up with black African students after 1994, it became unattractive as an option for coloured students, likely because of racism and classism in relation to black people. For many coloured families, their class ambitions are not downward towards African people. This type of perception was ingrained by the apartheid system, which created hierarchies of status: from white people at the top down to Indian, coloured and then African people at the bottom of the race/class pyramid. The social aspirations of coloured families, in other words, are upwards towards the majority-white segment of the public school system. Since the end of apartheid, virtually no coloured or white families have migrated towards majority-black African schools; Clinton Primary School was not going to be the first.

Needless to say, this trend among coloured (and white) families had its exceptions, but even then, the receiving school would query an unusual applicant, as one school administrator recalled about her coloured friend:

> *A friend of mine, she stays in Mitchells Plain [and] … she applied at Clinton. Went for interviews and she said the principal said, 'I can accept this child, no problem, but are you willing to come here knowing your child is going to be one out of ten coloured children in Grade 1? Are you willing to send your child to the school?' She said yes. The principal said [again], 'Are you going to be okay with your child in a school that is majority black (African)?'*

As the middle classes avoided Clinton Primary School for reasons of stigma, the one class of families who sought out the school was poorer black Africans from as far afield as Khayelitsha, Gugulethu and Mitchells Plain. For this segment of Cape Town's working classes, Clinton Primary School was a significant improvement, given the state of the township schools where they lived. For the children, this involves hours of travelling every day, as the principal relates: 'Now we have 80–90 per cent of our children who are African [so that] we are seen as a commuting school.' As the Clinton Primary children return home every day, their neighbours notice that they are different, better prepared academically; the families of the enrolled children also become aware of the positive impact of this school in the Southern Suburbs. And so, by word of mouth, the news spreads in the townships that this is an accessible school with reasonable fees that also offers one other critical advantage: 'I think the school has been seen as a kind of gateway school, where people believe that if their children are placed in the school then it's easier for them to get access to high schools in the area, because they have a good reputation.'

It is not that Clinton Primary, like other former white schools, has not managed to maintain, and even raise, its academic reputation in terms of scholastic achievement. This is what frustrates the principals of the former white schools such as Clinton Primary.

## The frustration of the black principals of former white schools

In some of the former white schools turned coloured-majority schools, the frustration of black principals is palpable. These principals work hard to maintain the standards of education from the pre-1994 era, but to no avail—white families continue to steer clear of schools that have turned majority black, even when the standards improve beyond what existed in the past. The principal of Clinton Primary School is perplexed:

> *When I came here the pass rate wasn't very good. Last year we actually got the highest pass rate in our history. In our Grade 3 for English and Maths, there was over 90 per cent pass rate and in Grade 6 there was just below 80 per cent. So last year, since I got here, at least one out of six children got bursaries and got access to the prominent high schools in the Cape.*

In the same way, the principal of Zeeman Academy felt he was doing everything right at his school. The standards were maintained, the school offered music and drama and sports, but slowly the white parents left as the black numbers grew. In frustration, the principal made the powerful statement quoted at the beginning of this chapter: 'I can match them academically, but I cannot compete against whiteness.' No doubt there are individual families who sense that, at Zeeman Academy, '[they] can get the same stuff at a lesser cost', but by and large, the school retains its overwhelming coloured demographic in enrolments.

The head of Marigold Primary School believes that it comes down to 'perceptions about who attends this school'—that is, coloured and African children of the lower classes. This negative perception also extends to 'foreigners' attending the school, which, across the Southern Suburbs, invariably refers to African nationals, often refugees, from countries north of South Africa. At times the places taken up by children of other African nationals create tension, even among South African black families, notes the principal of Marigold Primary School:

> *I got a call from an irate parent from Capricorn and he said, 'It's a problem that I can't get my child in here. You've got so many foreigners there. This is not what our forefathers fought for; this is not what our parents and their parents fought for. We should get a place at your school.'*

Here, interestingly, was a tussle among black families about who should be viewed as the more legitimate black families, and whose children deserved admission to a former white school. The question of black African families from outside South Africa has become a largely unspoken concern among schools of the Southern Suburbs as they have tried to create policies that take into account this added dimension of the politics of admissions in the competition for limited spaces.

And finally, there is the principal of Bayside Primary School, who also ascribes the loss of white parents and their children to perceptions that associate school quality with the dominant race of enrolled students and the costs of tuition: 'White seems to be better because they charge a little bit more fees,' he complains. At the heart of the problem is racism, and although the coloured principal does not call it such, he is clear that 'the more coloured

we become, the more black we become, the [more people think the] standard is going to drop'. He, too, works hard to ensure that the academic standards are upheld:

> *We're obviously trying to improve with our results and 'systemics'[1] [to show that] we offer the same kinds of programmes that they offer across the road. I think we hold our own in terms of results and we send kids out to the same schools that they send kids to, but I do think those other things play a role.*

This appeal to common standards with the 'whiter' schools, and even evidence of improved standards compared to the past history of a particular school, does little to persuade white middle-class parents to enrol their children in schools that have turned black.

## Systematic resegregation: Three key principles

Systematic resegregation in terms of school-level processes does not enjoy much attention in research on school integration (see, as an exception, Wells et al 2017). Most of the available research has examined large data sets for purposes of secondary data analysis to show segregation/resegregation trends over time in large numbers of schools or school districts (see, for example, Reardon et al 2012; Stroub & Richards 2013). There are certainly no studies that have examined the nuanced and complex micropolitics of resegregation in schools where white students are an economic majority but a demographic minority.

Even so, one of the major cross-national studies, titled *Understanding School Desegregation*, does not include a single chapter on resegregation (Bonal & Bellei 2018). This first attempt at making sense of a complex phenomenon as it plays out in school-level decisions has revealed three important and related concepts: the tipping point, re-grouping and strategic interdependence.

1 The systemic tests are annual, provincial-wide tests in English and Mathematics for all children in Grades 3, 6 and 9, intended to objectively gauge the state of education across schools and to design appropriate interventions to improve learning in the areas tested.

## The concept of the tipping point

First, it emerges that South Africa's former white schools are not immune to what has been called the 'tipping point' (Caetano & Maheshri 2017) in the racial integration of schools. That is to say, as the number of black students increases in a school, a threshold is reached where white families withdraw their children to find another school. Such a threshold is reached gradually, for there is among parents in the white schools an initial tolerance for the admission of a reasonable number of black students. At Bayside Primary School a teacher who taught at the school both before and after 1994 recalls the dynamics of integration over time:

> *When there was about a third or whatever, parents were, like, 'This is absolutely fine, we love the situation.' Parents were mixing with other races. It did seem [however] that when it got to about half, there seemed to be a withdrawal to go to schools that kept themselves a little more lily-white. I thought at one stage we would land up having no white children.*

At Bayside Primary School, as in other integrating schools, 'white flight' was in the direction of a nearby majority-white school. The advent of non-racial democracy in 1994 was the one change on the political landscape that triggered school integration, and thus the movement towards the tipping point at certain schools in the Southern Suburbs.

As the evidence in this chapter has shown, not all schools are equally vulnerable to reaching this tipping point in black/white enrolments. The schools most affected are those with several, if not all, of the following characteristics:

- They are generally smaller white schools.
- They serve mainly lower-middle-class families.
- They are located in English-dominant or English-aspirational communities.
- They are situated along major public transport routes or near townships.
- They are located in neighbourhoods where the housing is affordable and within reach of black professional families.

This research has also found that once the tipping point is reached, the process of resegregation is irreversible. That is, virtually no school in the more than 25 years since the formal end of apartheid has become majority white

again, or more diverse in its enrolments. This linear process of resegregation unfolds despite what the school does in terms of maintaining—or even raising—the academic standards that existed when the school was still all white.

What is further noteworthy in the politics of race in this region of the country is that in almost all cases, resegregation happens in favour of coloured students over African students. This is largely because of the demographic majority of the coloured population in the Western Cape. However, when a school resegregates in favour of African enrolments, the school is bypassed by both white and coloured middle-class families.

The social dynamics of resegregation therefore requires closer study of the directionality of tipping—that is, how and where exactly families re-group away from darkening schools and towards majority-white schools.

## The concept of re-grouping

When white families leave the 'schools that have turned black', they re-group at and around whiter schools—those at which white enrolments are still the majority or more visibly present in the school. The concept of re-grouping is a dynamic process in which white and coloured South Africans actively choose racial membership in school communities where they feel they are represented in the majority. Re-grouping happens in two parts—departing from a darkening school and reassembling at a white-dominant school.

When parents re-group, there are typically one or two targeted schools. For example, Bayside Primary School's parents re-grouped as white families at Kingstone or Sierra primary schools. Royal Primary School's departing white parents re-grouped at Redding and Peakrest primary schools. Laerskool Pieter Voud's and Laerskool Steph Stodel's parents re-grouped by race and language at Laerskool Joos Adam. To re-group, therefore, is to seek out membership with your own racial group, as was the case when the departing school was still all white or white-dominant.

The act of re-grouping has stated and unstated rationales. The stated rationales, presented in the interviews, is that the white middle-class and elite schools have more resources, offer wider curricular options, employ better teachers, enjoy expansive facilities, enrol students who are friends of the moving children, and generally are more attractive to paying clients. The unstated rationales, seldom articulated in the interviews, is the fear that 'standards will drop' as more black and poorer students begin to become dominant in the school's enrolments. Sometimes, those otherwise unstated

fears slip out. As the coloured principal of Bayside Primary School relates of his white teachers, 'They complain regularly that there are too many weak, black students coming into the school.' Or, as the white principals of several schools said during the sit-down interviews, 'There's always expenses when you become inclusive.' The fact is, however, that learning support has always been available in these former white schools for white children with academic needs, but it now seems to be viewed as a problem because it is extended to black students.

When stripped of all the polite rationales, however, the most basic impulse driving the re-grouping of white South African parents seems to be racism. White, but also black middle-class parents, as shown in the powerful case of Clinton Primary School, express classist attitudes by re-grouping with more uniformly middle-class parents at the stable and elite schools. Such re-grouping towards whiter and higher-class schools is easiest for those families that can afford the high fees of the elite schools, but it also happens for black and white families who can afford the tuition of stable middle-class schools in the Southern Suburbs.

The mobility that comes with re-grouping means that most of the 30 primary schools studied in the Southern Suburbs are easily sustained in their dominant racial patterns of enrolments and their class status. The elite schools are majority white and expensive; the stable middle-class schools are more integrated, but most of them are still white-dominant and affordable to the middle classes; the fragile middle-class schools have all turned black, and their fees are the most affordable for working-class and less affluent families. Re-grouping, in short, enables the maintenance of a race and class equilibrium in schools where patterns of integration have become more settled over time.

## The concept of strategic interdependence

This research has shown the interdependence of former white schools in the same area when it comes to the desegregation of schools. This means, as we have seen, that for a majority-white school to remain white-dominant, it depends on white students leaving a neighbouring school that has become black. Put the other way, when a former white school turns black, its enrolments flow to a nearby school, which is then able to maintain, and even expand, its white enrolments as a consequence. For families in the same area—such as Bergvliet in the south or Pinelands in the northern parts

of the Southern Suburbs—what happens in the one school with respect to enrolments by race affects the other school.

But such interdependence is strategic rather than random. It enables certain patterns of enrolments by race to be sustained, even as it upends former white schools that turn black. The triads of schools described in this chapter depend on each other, and sometimes principals consciously tap into those interdependencies when it comes to individual students. As already described, a principal would talk about calling a neighbouring school for, say, a few male students or a black African girl, and so forth, because they were running short of that demographic in a particular school year. Such fine-tuning of a school's racial demographics depends on an exchange relationship between schools in the same area. Such actions support our contention that the overall racial profile of a school is not driven by a clear and consistent application of the admissions policy, but by the actions of principals, which tip the balance of enrolments in their favour. In short, where tipping behaviours and re-grouping are about what white and middle class families do, strategic interdependence is achieved also by what schools do.

## Conclusion

This study on the micropolitics of resegregation is the first of its kind in showing the complex interdependencies of schools in the small areas. Schools do not simply 'become black' or 'remain white'; they do so in relation to a range of factors that enable the resegregation of schools as all-black or predominantly white. What this study has shown is that those factors such as the location of a school in relation to public transport or a township—are not accidental; rather, parents and schools make active choices that determine the racial demographics of schools in close proximity to each other. In other words, the politics of parental choice also determines the patterns of segregation and resegregation in former white schools.

What happens, however, when a white school defies the burden of history and creates, through its admissions policy, something exceptional—an integrated school where majority-black enrolments co-exist with significant white student numbers?

# CHAPTER 8

# Red School: A Model of Integration, a Work in Progress

*It was just, from the beginning, the openness to difference.*
—Red School parent

## Opening

The 10-year-old boy at the door of the principal's office appears to be lost. 'Come inside, Ben, and meet our visitors,' says Principal Ann Morton, with a welcoming sweep of her right arm. Ben moves cautiously and takes the open seat opposite the two researchers visiting the school for the day. The young man now looks completely comfortable as his legs swing above the floor. Then the unexpected: 'What would you like to drink?' asks Principal Ann. 'Rooibos tea,' says Ben, 'with milk please.' The principal leaves the office immediately to make arrangements for Ben's cup of tea as the Grade 4 student starts to tell the visiting researchers about his reading interests.

## A 'decolonised', exceptional school

What does meaningful integration look like in practice? How does a school use its admissions policy to advance a progressive practice of inclusion? This chapter is a story about a single day of close-up observations of leadership and learning at an exceptional South African school. The story is composed as it happened, with engagements with the principal being frequently interrupted by a child entering or passing by or simply hanging around—to which the principal responds as captured in the text above.

The day starts early at Pinelands North Primary School (PNPS), affectionately known as Red School, after the colour of the school uniform. It is maroon, actually, but 'red' is simple enough to distinguish this exceptional school from the two other primary schools in the area, Blue School and Green School, also nicknamed for their respective uniform colours. It is 7.30 a.m., and the daily briefing meeting in the staff tearoom is about to start. Except that everything stops as one of the teachers enters the room,

and her colleagues leap from their chairs to hug her in the middle of the room. A celebratory balloon carries the number 30 and suddenly a group of children appears and rap one of those Spur Steakhouse songs that replace the time-tested 'Happy Birthday to You': 'We don't know but we've been told/ Super Girl is getting old.' A joyous moment has interrupted an official meeting, and Principal Ann seems as excited as the rest of her staff involved in this short interlude.

By looking, you would not be able to distinguish Principal Ann from the cast of mainly young-looking white and black teachers seated in a circle around the staff room. The seating arrangement was deliberate, we would learn later: 'When you face each other, you can't talk behind the other's back,' explained Ann. The principal, sitting among her teachers, was in a sporty grey-and-white dress with white sports shoes to boot. Then, spontaneously, individual teachers start to share announcements. A visibly pregnant teacher tells of the chess team's victory over Green School the previous day; she is genuinely elated, and her arms pump in the air. Another teacher reminds colleagues of an upcoming visit by government officials. The principal relates that she was pleasantly surprised by the visit of the Minister of Education (it was actually the provincial Member of the Executive Council [MEC] for Education) who popped into the school the previous day. Other teachers share their news or announcements. And then Principal Ann concludes the briefing with a short inspirational reading from a source on 'mindfulness'. The teachers disperse to take care of the students.

On the school tarmac, children are lined up in their maroon uniforms. Teachers responsible for after-school coaching that day are allowed to wear their maroon tracksuits. 'Do you not have separate lines for boys and girls?' asks one of the researchers, as children line up before moving to their classrooms. 'No,' says a young teacher, 'the children are comfortable with mixed lines.' This is one of the many small innovations at Red School that distinguishes the school from any other primary school in South Africa. Mixed lines—and some children without shoes. It is a choice, among others, that the school regards as progressive and forward-thinking. 'Some teachers took advantage of the barefoot rule too,' says an incomplete documentary account of the history of Red School being compiled by Principal Ann (Morton nd).

Outside the principal's office is a long chain of installations thoughtfully placed to attract children who might not fit into the routines of everyday

public schooling in South Africa. 'Boys playing soccer used to fight each other on the playground,' says the principal, so she created alternative opportunities for recreation where children could, quite literally, take time out from the normal things—for instance, a dollhouse with open doors and floors and movable characters. 'Shhh,' said one of the boys playing with the dollhouse one day. Ann was intrigued. 'We have solved the murder of Oscar Pistorius's girlfriend!' he explained, referring to the young woman whom the 'blade runner' shot behind his bathroom door. There is also an elaborate train set on tracks, and a large, carefully curated fish tank to occupy children at any time of the day. A 'tweet' birdcage enables children to 'tweet' their concerns and feelings by writing them down on 'post-it' notes and dropping them into the birdcage. These are read by Ann every week. Nothing in the long passage outside Ann's office is there by accident. The innovations are meant to offer alternative recreation opportunities for children.

Long before visitors to Red School reach the principal's office, or encounter the dollhouse and the model train, they have to navigate around about a dozen ducks, some rescued from the SPCA, wandering inside the front gate of the school. This, says Ann, is the 'soft curriculum' of the school—along with the black-and-white rabbit in another specially prepared safe space on the other side of the school, the delightful aviary nearer the preschool section, and the small tortoise that Ann scoops up as she takes the visitors through the school. Animals are everywhere. The neighbour's large ginger cat, Robert, has clearly become very comfortable inside one of the many boxes placed on cupboards along the main passage. A guinea pig in an outside structure sniffs in the direction of the visitors. Eggs are hatching inside an incubator in one of the classrooms. An introverted child can take the parakeet or the cockatiel to class to bolster his confidence or calm him down. A teacher can bring her dog into the classroom.

Nothing at Red School is as striking as the toilets, for there is no other school in South Africa that designs its lavatory facilities with transgender children in mind. 'What is the one thing you are proud of about your school?' asks Ann, as she grabs a group of girls coming down the passage during an earlier visit to the school. 'Our toilets,' they say. Here is inclusion writ large, and yet the school leader has taken care to ease the community into an idea that is radical for a public primary school in post-apartheid society. Some of the toilets have both male and female signs, but these are single-entry facilities. Others are only male- or female-signed toilets, which

seems to be a transitional arrangement, for Ann promises that those will also become shared facilities in time. And there is a specific toilet for children with disabilities. Ann is clear that eventually all the toilets will be combined male and female toilets.

Radical change of the kind in evidence at Red School inevitably brings resistance. A set of Christian parents left when they heard of the planned shared toilet arrangements to include transgender children. Ann remembers that when she became principal, some parents chose other schools, since they found out that she does not attend church. She does, however, recognise the spiritual lives of children, but in an inclusive way that has gradually seen the manifestly Christian school become more open in its religious observances, with, for example, an imam invited in to teach the Muslim children. The school assembly now hears inclusive values about good living, where once it was a Christian ceremony, with Bible readings, hymn singing and recitations of the Lord's Prayer.

The request from some Muslim girls around 2008 to wear headscarves during Ramadan was quickly approved, though few continued the practice in this predominantly Christian school and neighbourhood. The recognition of Muslim families and their children would not go unnoticed, and the resulting snide comments were no surprise, like the ones from the secretary of another school who called Principal Ann to say that her school had 'aligned itself with the Muslim community by your choice of colour'—because the building had been painted peach!

Such comments have not deflected Ann from her plans to 'decolonise the school', as she called the mix of small reforms designed to respond to the requirements for an inclusive, democratic education. Long before the decolonisation movement hit university campuses in 2015-2016, Red School had already adopted a gender-neutral uniform policy. Hair that touches the collar has to be tied up, without reference to gender. Children decide whether to wear the summer or winter uniform clothing, which has been changed from the traditional 'colonial' outfit to ones that fit the South African climate, including the option not to wear shoes (Morton nd).

Suddenly, out of nowhere, a Grade 1 girl walking awkwardly with arms flailing runs towards Ann in the passage and throws her arms around the principal's legs. The child is ecstatic and her joy unmistakable. 'And what are you going to do today, Zuri?' asks Ann, as she matches the excited voice of the child. 'I. Am. Going. To. Work. Hard. Today,' says the

youngster, staccato and with emphasis, as she pumps her arms downwards with each word. Zuri runs off to her class. This is a school where children with Asperger's syndrome, just like Ben, the boy who ordered rooibos tea in Ann's office, are mainstreamed. Here, inclusive education is a deliberate practice and the school is designed to ensure that each child excels despite their disability.

As we have seen, schools choose parents, but parents also choose schools. And if there is one thing that attracts parents to Red School, it is the open commitment to inclusion, in its broadest sense. As one set of parents relates, 'We were looking for a school that was more welcoming of alternative families, and this one did stick out compared to everyone else. This was our first choice after visiting other schools.' For another parent, it is about 'fit':

> *My son was not accepted at schools for a number of reasons and he was struggling to fit into his previous school. While we were surrounded by really good schools in the leafy Southern Suburbs, I was not convinced his individuality, his quirkiness would be appreciated. He is very intelligent but because of what happened to him at other schools the adventure of learning plummeted. The clincher for him in coming to Pinelands North was that his favourite colour was red so that was the end of that discussion.*

And then there are parents whose children have one or another disability and Red School is the obvious choice:

> *My oldest son has a genetic syndrome, but we as a family wanted to see what sets the school apart. This was the only school where the secretary was kind; everywhere else they made me feel like I was ludicrous in calling their school. I looked into Ann's eyes and could see that as I was explaining my son to her, there was an embracing of him, an openness to difference. She wasn't looking to get out of the conversation. It was just, from the beginning, the openness to difference.*

For these wonderfully unique children, the school was designed to 'fit out'—to accommodate the incoming students, not simply insist that they 'fit in'. To accomplish this, Ann appoints not only teacher aides to assist the main

teacher in a classroom, but also facilitators to assist the children. She has implemented a facilitator course that the school runs for all who are interested, which is now a community initiative run by the Red School. The facilitators are trained professionals who work with one to three children with special needs in a class. A boy swinging from a tyre roped to a tree is alone outside the classroom with his facilitator; Ann explains, 'A child who finds the class too stressful can ask to go outside and just be with his facilitator.' In the library, two children are sitting on the floor writing a test that they missed. Another sits with her facilitator, a young woman who was herself a student at Red School. Ann moves towards the facilitator and holds her fast: 'Jayne was a very, very gifted child at this school; I failed her. I did not give her the kind of learning support she needed at the time.' Ann's striking honesty is evident as she talks about her leadership journey as principal of Red School: how she became a better principal based in large part on her own biography.

## The making of a principal—and the transformation of a school

Ann was born in Mowbray, Cape Town, into a working-class family. Her father left home when she was 14, 'making us poorer', and her stay-at-home mother had to go and work at Clarke's department store to make ends meet. 'We became latchkey kids,' she remembers. But Ann loved going to school because it was a safe place, and it offered vital lessons in safety that would have a bearing on her later life as a teacher and leader:

> *My dad was an alcoholic, so home was not a safe space to be. This is one reason why I create safe spaces here because I know not all homes are safe places to be. If I could stay at school, where adults are predictable and not abusive or whatever then I would have felt better as a person. No one knew that about me at school. I am an introvert who behaves like an extrovert because I cover it up beautifully. I am an actress.*

Ann, the eldest of three children, had to take care of her two siblings. Her father was abusive, and her mother was timid. When he was home, Ann would shut the bedroom door and play music loudly, so that they were shielded from the sounds of abuse in the small house. Her sharp desire to protect the most vulnerable thus has its origin in Ann's troubled upbringing.

In the process, she had to learn to survive and make her own way through formal education: 'I was the protector, the leader, the comforter, the one who had to seem not to be affected, giving my Mom advice, thinking on my feet, solving problems, all that kind of thing.'

When her father was present, he was controlling. His idea was for Ann to become a travel agent so that she could see the world. But Ann wanted to become a teacher. Her father made it clear that if she pursued that route, he would not support her financially. Ann chose her own course and worked at the Stuttafords department store on Fridays and weekends to support herself.

Ann completed primary education at Rosebank Junior School and continued on to the academically demanding environment of Rustenburg Girls' High School, which she merely tolerated: 'I was always smart, but I did not perform because I was too hyperactive and realised that you could do enough to get away with other stuff.'

Yet Ann knew early on that she wanted to become a teacher to change things and improve the lives of others. She thought of being a school inspector or even a lecturer at a teachers' college but she saw how harsh these professions were. Being a teacher would allow Ann an opportunity to demonstrate

> *another way of changing the world, [to] start making a school that would indicate 'this is what a South African school should look like; this is the way that children should be respected and cared for; this is the drive and enthusiasm that teachers should be showing; this is the way a school should be managed.'*

With this vision in mind, Ann went on to pursue her teacher qualification at the then Mowbray Teachers College, now the Education Campus of the Cape Peninsula University of Technology. As a new teacher, Ann passed from one school to the next, learning hard lessons about how to lead, and not to lead, young children. Each experience shaped Ann's understanding of teaching and leading in ways that are reflected in her headship of Red School.

At Boston Primary School, she learned the discipline of hard work, and that is where 'they made me who I am, a perfectionist working myself to death'. At a girls' school, she served under a principal who was a bully, and who openly mocked her teachers during staff meetings. This terrible

experience made such an impression on Ann that she recalls it with some emotion years later. At Blue School, Ann had a positive experience under a principal who allowed her to run the school, important preparation for her coming leadership role at Red School. But at another girls' school, where she served as deputy, the principal ruled with an iron fist, even suggesting who she should befriend—'I was naturally inclined to the rebels'—and her boss 'almost had a heart attack' when Ann showed up in her customary short skirts.

Then came her opportunity. At Red School, all of the senior people were departing—the principal, the deputy and the head of the Foundation Phase. Here was an opportunity to fashion a school in a new mould, drawing on her formative experiences as a teacher and deputy principal. In those days, it was unusual to appoint a woman as head of a co-educational school, Ann recalls, but 'they took a chance on me'. And that is how Ann Morton became the first woman principal of Red School, which since its founding has had only four other heads—a sign of constancy not uncommon in the established public schools of the Southern Suburbs.

Now was her chance to take all of her positive and negative learnings from experiences at other schools and put them into practice in her leadership of Red School. However, Ann did not easily move on from negative experiences elsewhere that she still wanted to sort out. So sometime during her tenure at Red, she applied for the principal's position at a school in the leafy suburbs:

> *I applied to this school because I wanted to change the school there; people needed to see that wealthy former Model C schools could also perform from the inside out. When I asked at the interview about the proudest thing about the school, they mentioned the 100 per cent math results! Here are children whom you are already singing to in the womb, they are getting extra lessons, they go to play school and to preschool—and they are proud of the results! Tell me, rather, that you're proud of the happy children, the diversity of your school.*

Ann stayed on at Red School, and things changed quickly at the school, which had been founded in 1948, the same year that the white National Party came to power on an election platform called apartheid. Red School, like Blue and Green schools, was founded as a school for whites living in the suburban area of Pinelands.

The end of apartheid in the 1990s meant that white schools had to choose whether to admit black students and if so, under what conditions. Red School chose to admit black students under a state-aided scheme called Model C (see Chapter 4). The school would receive government funding for teacher salaries and operations, but with the right to raise private funds through school fees and the authority to choose their own students. The number of non-white students was not to exceed 50 per cent of enrolments under this scheme. Slowly, black students would be enrolled, but the school remained majority white through much of the early years of democracy.

It was on 30 October 1990 that the school committee of Red School first decided to implement an open school policy. The issue of standards came up. But many families believed that an integrated school better prepared their children for life and work in a changing South Africa. Coming from areas such as Thornton, Wingfield and Ysterplaat, the first 50 black children were 'bused in to the school in civvies, because it was too dangerous for them to be seen in PNPS uniform. Once at school, they changed into their uniforms' (Morton nd).

At the time, many of the white parents of Pinelands started to panic. Red School was open to children of other races, and that could only mean one thing: academic standards would drop. Current parents of Red School remember those times well: 'When we had to choose between Red and Green School 17 years ago, we were told by just about everybody that Red was not going to be academically the best school to put our child in.' This was based simply on the perception that Red School was opening its gates to black children, as another parent recalls:

> *Soon after I got there was the white flight; people migrated. Girls went to Rustenburg; it was a quick move to get out of here. The attitude was 'the school is now open and we're going to have a problem, and we've got to get out of here' and 'before long the school would be all dark and then what?'*

> *I grew up here. I would often have conversations with friends in Pinelands and they went, 'We weren't as good as the Rondebosch, Rustenburg [students].' We would go to house parties and people thought I was a Rustenburger, and when I proudly said, 'I'm a Pinelander', they would go 'Oh!'.*

The black children entering Red School would walk into an environment that contained a confusing mix of callousness and compassion, as the white children awaited them. Asked for their reflection on the coming intake of black children, some of the white primary school children at the time wrote the following comments, which doubtless reflected the bigotry of the adults in their lives:

> *Our sport would improve a lot because blacks are very skilled at sport because in the afternoon they have nothing to do but to play with soccer balls.*
>
> *They are no different to us … it's just that they aren't used to obeying rules.*
>
> *If Indians come, I could play Cowboys and Indians.*
>
> *They will be good runners, as they are always running from the police.*

In stark contrast, there were the children who, even then, came from homes with more open, liberal attitudes towards others:

> *This plants a seed for a democratic South Africa. I want to know their feelings inside. I will try my best to make them feel at home. Will they fight with us because we have had many privileges for so long?*
>
> *Do they play games? If they are drowning, I will save them and if they are crying, I will ask what is the matter. If they are thirsty, then I will give them a cool drink. I might even fall in love with one.*
>
> *I don't know why they hesitated. When they work for you and call you miss, I feel so sad. I don't see why they didn't have open schools from the beginning.*

Ann had to work hard to transform the school's understanding of inclusion and acceptance in relations between students generally, and especially in terms of race and disability. Here too, Ann's own biography shaped her complete

immersion in the life of the school and her devotion to the disadvantaged. Where did these deep commitments to children come from? What were the roots of her progressive ideas around race, disability and inclusion? Was it her mother? 'No, my mother was actually anti-black. I was always different from my mother. I got very angry about [racism] and that I was always in a white school. I was always aware of what was going on around me.'

For Ann the situation in white schools was unreal. The new country required a school system that prepared children for the real world, where black and white would live together and work together. 'I just knew in my heart that a real school had to have real people, reflecting the real world.' What schools were doing was simply not sustainable. And so, Ann set about changing that from the moment she entered the principal's office of Red School. She started by insisting that she be called 'Ann' by the teachers and parents, her way of levelling the relationships in the school. 'You can't do that, you'll lose respect,' one of her colleagues told Ann. 'Respect is something you earn,' Ann insisted.

But her devotion to the children of Red School came from somewhere much deeper than implementing a policy on inclusion; it was very personal:

> *It comes partly from the fact that my husband and I could not have children. I was a control freak and now the baby-making thing did not go according to plan. For more than seven years we put our whole lives on hold with fertility treatment. Clearly God did not want me to have children and now I believe that every one of these children here has been brought to me to change and be changed. I put all my nurturing into them.*

Red School has come a long way since those intense, uncertain days marking the end of apartheid. Of that time, Ann remembers: 'When I took over this white school of white people it was not real, not even in 1997.' In 2019, Red School had 450 students, of which about 70 per cent were black students—that is, mainly coloured and a smaller number of African students. The exact numbers are imprecise. Red School is the only school in a studied sample of 30 primary schools that refused to submit the required data on enrolments by race to be recorded on the Central Educational Management Information System (CEMIS) of the Western Cape Education Department (WCED). Ann reflects a progressive sentiment in these liberal parts that finds it

uncomfortable to see apartheid's racial categories applied to human beings, but there is also a much more practical objection. How do you count race in a manifestly mixed-race school where one parent is black and another white? Then there are white parents who adopt black children but give them English names, so the racial bean counters would be thoroughly confused.

And yet, Principal Ann is not unaware of the realities of race, resources and the region when it comes to social and educational inequalities. Red School is located in the comfortably middle-class suburb of Pinelands, where the families include typically liberal academics from the University of Cape Town (UCT), senior government workers from the public sector, successful business managers from the private sector and people who own their own businesses. As far as the former white communities are concerned, Pinelands forms part of neither the much more affluent suburbs of Upper Claremont and Bishopscourt to the west nor the less wealthy areas of Goodwood and Thornton to the east. And even though Red School attracts children of middle-class families, a government report on the school notes that 'some (families) are exceptionally poor' (WCED 2017:2).

Red, Blue and Green schools are surrounded by the coloured townships of Garden Village, Factreton and Kensington on one side, and the African township of Langa on the other. The demographic pressures are real, and resulted in Blue School turning black in a short period of time. Red School has managed to include more and more black students while retaining the rich diversity of the school with significant numbers of white students. Unlike in many former white schools in the USA and South Africa, when the tipping point of a black student majority was reached at Red School, a visible number of white students remained.

There are three likely reasons why Red School did not turn black, as Blue School did. First, the white parents are generally more liberal in their political persuasions and wanted their children to live and learn in a diverse environment, so they stayed. As one parent observed, 'There's a growing generation of white people who don't want to live in the past. And I think a lot of them would choose Pinelands North.' The most common refrain among these parents is that schools must prepare children for the real world, and Red School does that. Second, the school maintained its academic reputation for offering a high-quality education in an inclusive environment, making it attractive to both black and white middle-class parents. This is reflected in the admirable systemic results, the literacy and numeracy scores in the

government's provincial-wide assessments of all schools. And third, the school managed its admissions policies in such a way that both quality and diversity were secured through its particular student enrolments. Schools craft and administer their own admissions policies, and this has proved to be a powerful instrument for either inclusion or exclusion.

## Unfinished business

As Principal Ann shares the news about her coming retirement, she has clear plans for the future of the school. She would like for a black woman to succeed her. The final say rests, of course, with the school governing body (SGB), and ultimately with the WCED, but there is a sense that this succession plan will come to fruition. If that happens, Red School will have achieved another first in this model school for racial integration—a black principal—more than 20 years since the first black teacher, Rose-Anne Lawrence, joined the all-white staff.

Red School struggles with some of the same demographic realities as other transforming schools in the Southern Suburbs—the slow growth in the number of black African students and, even more so, of black African teachers. Where these schools do claim growth in diversity, it is almost always a result of having more coloured students. The Western Cape has always yielded relative privilege to coloured people over African people. Africans were regarded by apartheid as belonging elsewhere, in the rural homelands of the Eastern Cape, for example, while the Coloured Labour Preference Area Policy provided job protection to this group regarded as neither white nor black African. The white nationalists imposed gradations of misery in the Cape, with Africans required to carry pass books while working in or visiting the so-called white areas. The long shadow of that racist past is reflected in the fact that coloured people remain a demographic majority over other groups in the province, even though Africans constitute a decisive majority in the country as a whole. The coloured middle class is also a much larger group than the African middle class in this part of South Africa.

Ann is clear that the relatively low numbers of African teachers and students is wrong, an injustice that must be corrected. She speaks about specific plans to make this right, including the appointment of more African teachers. While much progress has been made with respect to racial integration and disability inclusion in this remarkable school, the question of African enrolments and appointments remains the next mountain for this leadership team to scale.

## A question of culture and climate

'I believe congratulations are in order!' Ann interrupts a young girl as she enters a class that is about to begin. 'You have a little baby brother, I heard!' She hugs the older sister of the newborn tightly. It is striking how Ann actually does know the name of every one of the 450 children in her school. But she knows much more than their given names. She knows about the personal struggles of every child, the difficult family circumstances, a recent achievement in the classroom or the sports field, and even the birth of a sibling. Ann knows the school intimately, and as she walks the research team through the grounds, she explains that 'this used to be one room' or 'we could not put down bore holes so we got well-points' or 'this is going to be a new building for the preschool class'. And then, 'Meet my new operations manager.'

Ann is a leader who knows her limits. She has built a strong team to complement her skill set and has made appointments that other schools might not consider—such as an operations manager to maintain the modest school grounds and buildings, in addition to the business manager. The facilitators are distinct from the teacher aides, another set of appointments. The bursar is not the finance officer, and the human resources (HR) clerk is a different position. And the aftercare head is different from the principal of the day school. 'This expansion of staff has helped our fee collection, in particular,' writes Ann in the unfinished compilation on the history of her school (subtitled, for the moment, 'My Life's Work'). 'Fewer and fewer parents are defaulting on payments, and fewer and fewer are applying for fee exemptions.'

This modest school, with much smaller grounds than the elite public and private schools of the Southern Suburbs, manages its money well. Its mid-range fees (from R19 000 to R24 000 in 2019, depending on the grade), which have to cover all the additional staff beyond what the WCED provides, is collected almost fully, and this gives the school the resources it needs to expand its facilities and its personnel. Nothing is extravagant at Red School, but everything is functional and adapted to make for an inclusive school environment with ample spaces for, say, the non-competitive, non-aggressive girl who simply wants to play with the rabbit, or the boy who wants to imagine himself inside the play dollhouse.

Another young boy, about nine years old, stands back as Ann and the research team occupy the passage. 'You can come through now,' says Ann, and the boy moves through to his next class. Suddenly, Ann shouts in the direction of the moving child, 'Derek, go to Mrs Steenberg and tell her that you were Caught in the Act!' The boy stops and turns around, absorbing the message. It sounds like discipline. Was it because the boy walked past and did not greet the visitors? More than an hour later, Ann takes to the school intercom to make a set of announcements. One of the announcements is about the boy. 'Derek, you were Caught in the Act! You waited for our visitors and did not barge through. I am so proud of you. Well done, Derek.'

The constant affirmation of both children and teachers is striking at Red School, with this LBWA (leadership by walking around) principal. There is a 'Caught in the Act' slip, which anyone can fill out and hand in for the principal's announcement. Nassir wrote on his slip, 'Ms Gregory was caught in the act of helping Nassir get a bee's sting out of his foot.' Another recorded that 'Class 5B was caught in the act walking beautifully down the passages today and yesterday.' And then, of course, 'Derek Meyer, Grade 5C, was caught in the act of being very well behaved in the passage when we had visitors.'

These inventions are the additional things that Principal Ann and her team do that stretch well beyond what the WCED expects from its schools. These are stretch leaders, and they know it: 'Pinelands North is now a completely multicultural society that puts people and animals before procedures and rules. We are recognised all over the country as a school which moves ahead, changing policy as we go.' (Morton nd).

As a public school, Red School was compliant with the government's constant changes to the curriculum, but they always asked what was in the best interests of their students. So, when the WCED discontinued music education, woodwork, needlework and physical education, Red School continued offering these subjects, for 'we believe that the skills learned in these "soft" subjects are skills that enable someone to converse and interact in a greater world' (Morton nd).

The 'soft curriculum' of Red School is challenging at times, for in competitions it is sometimes seen as the 'Ag, shame!' school. Like when Red School was trounced in hockey matches with another school precisely because the emphasis is less on competition and more on cooperation, as this insightful account of a parent reveals:

*Mother: Why were you swimming so slowly in the race?*

*Son: So that my friend could catch up. I was waiting for him.*

*Mother: Okay, but then you're going to lose!*

*Son: But then my friend would be even further behind!*

For some parents, the important thing is about both competition and cooperation, and getting the balance right between the two, in contrast to the pressures exerted by mainstream schools, where winning is everything. For many parents at Red School, it is about doing your best, regardless of where you come in the race. But the 'Ag, shame!' perception is something that stings among some parents in the hyper-competitive environment of South Africa's elite public schools.

Red School nevertheless stretches the curriculum to include community singing and isiXhosa, beyond the two required languages, and economics in the Intermediate Phase, even after it was officially withdrawn. The timetable has also been stretched, giving more time in the day for the additional subjects. Another innovation in the timetable was allowing for singing during the time that Muslim students needed to attend mosque on Fridays, so normal subject teaching time is lost.

None of these departures from the norm at Red School seem to bother the WCED. In fact, when the province's whole-school evaluation visit was conducted towards the end of 2017, Red School received full marks for 'overall performance of the school' and for all but two of the areas of evaluation, including quality of teaching and learning, student achievement, and curriculum provision (WCED 2107). The WCED's report has the principal in mind when it notes that '[t]he school has a highly effective and dynamic school-based support team (SBST), which is led by the "Head of Inclusive Support"'. And even though Red School participates in the government's systemic assessments with all their children—including 'those who will never be able to read'—in 2019 they achieved 96.8 and 93.4 per cent for Grade 3 and 6 mathematics respectively, as well as 90.3 and 88.5 per cent for Grade 3 and 6 language respectively.

As the research team takes in the school, its culture and climate, one of the members enters a senior primary class. The children, as they always do in South African schools, stand up and greet the visitor warmly. 'So,' he asks the natural science class in process, 'can I ask you a math question?' The children

drop everything for the distraction of the game. 'A man has six cows and 12 goats; how many pigs does he have?' As is also common in the country's classrooms, all kinds of calculations are offered with the numbers six and 12 in play. The answer 'zero' is also predictable, and a discussion follows on whether 'zero' is a value on the number line. Of course it is, and so 'zero' is not the answer. The visitor leaves the question with the class to solve on their own, to the satisfaction of the teacher.

For the rest of the day, one or more students accost the visitor with attempts at answering the question. They are curious, eager to get to the bottom of things. Eventually, in a woodwork class—where the majority of the students are girls—the visitor has no choice but to engage the students towards a solution. 'Is there information about cows?' 'Yes,' they echo. 'Is there information about goats?' Of course. 'Was anything said about pigs?' Nothing. 'So, is it possible that the man has 100 pigs?' There is a buzz. Some say 'no' and some say 'yes'. Eventually, there is agreement that he might have 100 pigs. 'Good. Then is it also possible that he has no pigs?' Now they agree, that is also a possible value for $x$. 'So,' asks the visitor, 'what does that say about the value of $x$?' That $x$ is unknown; we simply do not know how many pigs the man has. 'Can we still get ice cream as the reward?' ask the children. A promise is a promise.

The children at Red School are different from those in most South African schools. The levels of spontaneity are rare for whole cohorts of students. The easy and yet respectful relationship with teachers and visitors alike are unlikely to be found in a typical public or private school, where distance and formality more often mark the relationship between educators and children.

Children breaking away to hug a principal or to enter her room for a cup of tea is not commonplace in schools anywhere in the world. The spontaneous hug is what some of the old boys and girls still do when they meet their teachers on the streets or in shopping malls, as some of the educators recall. It is also what prospective parents witness on the playgrounds and what helped some of them make the decision to choose Red School.

What happens at Red School is a consequence of what school leaders and teachers actually do. In other words, the children are the dependent variables in the drama of schooling—what they do and how they behave is almost entirely a result of adult behaviours and expectations. The culture of Red School expressed among the children has been built up over time,

under the unusual leadership of the principal and her leadership team. One particularly striking moment was caught by a Red School parent:

> *I remember that we had a play here and the teachers all wore different t-shirts. Ann had a t-shirt that read 'ADHD', and when my child came home he said, 'I am just like Mrs Morton,' because he could see himself in the adults around him. He did not have to worry [about his own condition].*

## Progressive pedagogy

Off to the side of the staff room, on the terrace, a teacher and a child are working through some subject matter problem. It is a sunny day and the terrace offers a warm refuge from the cooler classrooms. The teacher presents the problem and then gives the child a chance to work through it. It does not seem that the child is 'getting it'. The gentle conversation goes on for some time—the teacher questions, directs and tests for understanding. Slowly, the child begins to understand. After about 30 minutes, the duo leave the terrace to return to class, but not before the teacher offers praise and tells the child how proud she is of him. 'I think I understand now,' says the youngster, as they leave the terrace.

The pedagogy (the 'how' of teaching) of Red School is no accident. How the teachers engage with children is something planned in advance. For some time, Red School sought out the best teachers from among the student teachers coming through the school for training. The good student teachers were selected to teach at Red School; their college or university fees were paid by the school and then they were contracted for the same number of years as teachers already at the school. Then Red School experimented with teacher interns, who would shadow experienced teachers at the school—learning, essentially, how to teach in such a school. Sometimes this worked very well, such as in the case of one intern who went on to become a teacher and then the head of teacher aides, 'as they learn so much about our particular school while "interning"' (Morton nd).

The pedagogy of Red School, observed across a number of classrooms, is one of easy interaction with children. They ask questions, work in groups and defy stereotypes in the course of teaching and learning. So, for example, the student in charge of the needlework class, offering leadership and

guidance to the rest, is a boy. The woodwork class is taught by the deputy principal, a woman, to group of predominantly female students. Children come into and leave the class on the basis of a special need for individualised learning identified by one of the facilitators.

This understanding of a progressive pedagogy at Red School extends beyond the principal and her team of teachers. The chair of the SGB, in his 2018 report, captured the spirit of what Red was trying to achieve:

> *Too many children of our nation are subjected to 'cookie-cutter, simply-regurgitate-data' philosophy—and we are expected to call that education … We continue to venture into ways of transforming the classroom (inside and out) into creative spaces of critical thinking and exploration.* (Rens 2018:4)

The pedagogy of Red is something the parents pick up on from the moment their children start at the school. One father saw the value of this pedagogy expressed in the life of his son:

> *One of the common factors in innovation is where they have the freedom to wonder or ask the question 'What if?' Sometimes you realise your question is useless, but nine out of ten [times] it leads you to discovery. That is one of the hallmarks of a good school, and it is not just the principal; the Red School is that and more. Here children ask 'What if?' and then go on this voyage [of] discovery. A teacher who is expecting a baby wore a shirt labelled Thing 1 [with] an arrow pointing to the bulging belly called Thing 2. My child came home and with this idea of Thing 1 and Thing 2 and that made him go into all kinds of discoveries and discussions at home.*

Such an expressive pedagogy allows children to build confidence in themselves, even those from more traditional family homes, as one Indian parent recalls:

> *What I wanted to add to that was the focus and curiosity that also applies to parents. I come from a traditional Indian family and my dad always says your kids are too free, they just say stuff. In the South Africa of today we need that. It also gives your children the confidence to be brave and that there is safe space in order to explore a lot.*

This confidence instilled in the children stands in stark contrast to the normal public and private schools of 'the leafy southern suburbs', as parents in focus group discussions raised repeatedly:

> *At my child's previous school, I had to drop her at the school and wave to her. I could not get into the school. Just the change in her when she got into this school, which allowed her to grow. She had the confidence to take an idea in Grade 2 to Ann and she was not shut down. Ann in turn took her idea to the staff, which was to dress up and raise funds for the Red Cross. She would not have gotten that anywhere else.*

Clearly, the influence of the school's pedagogy on the children also impacts the homes from which the children come. They ask questions and draw parents into discussions that would not necessarily have occurred before the children enrolled in Red School.

This commitment to a progressive pedagogy is reflected not only in the normal teaching programme of the school, but also in its learning support programme—with a dedicated staff—as well as the creative and talented programme. In the latter, children learn critical and creative thinking, how to deal with their emotions, and subjects such as inventing robots. In this primary school, the most important learning seems to happen at the edges of the mainstream curriculum.

## An affirming, inclusive and value-driven ethos

Such a progressive approach to teaching and learning reflects something much bigger at Red School, and that is the school climate, the very character of the school itself. Ann does not recall a single reported incident of bullying in her school over the course of 15 years, although she concedes that bullying might be possible. Children are affirmed openly all the time, especially those with disabilities. 'We all are special; they suck it up from each other. There's lots of empathy. The (constant) message in assembly and all of that is that you are special the way you are.'

This affirming school climate was witnessed by the research team in the classrooms, along the passages, and, of course, on the playground. Red School makes its students feel special and included, and this is evident in everything from the symbolism of the toilet signs to the allowance for

unusual behaviour, as revealed in this conversation between Ann and Ben, the boy mentioned earlier in the chapter, who has Asperger's syndrome:

> *Ann: Ben, maybe tell them also what school was like when you first came here to the school. You found school very hard, didn't you?*
>
> *Ben: Yea, at first I was worried there weren't going to be a lot of toys, as at my previous school.*
>
> *Ann: But when you came to the school you really struggled to be in the classroom and to do what other children were doing.*
>
> *Ben: Then you gave me Auntie Sheila.*
>
> *Ann: That's right! I forgot it was Auntie Sheila who came to help you.*
>
> *Ben: She was my first facilitator. She helped me with what I was struggling with.*
>
> *Ann: What were you struggling with?*
>
> *Ben: I don't remember.*
>
> *Ann: I remember. You were hiding under the desk, even in Grade 4, and then you used to run away sometimes as well.*
>
> *Ben: The first few years I thought school was boring and then eventually I started to get used to it.*
>
> *Ann: Oh, here's your tea, Ben.*

In this exchange Ann reveals herself as a leader; her compassion for Ben and her patience with a struggling student are obvious. She treats Ben as an adult in the presence of the visitors and helps him remember his own growth and development in the school. The respect is real; it is felt, and as it is observed, one of the many puzzles about how a school creates a positive school climate is laid bare.

The climate of the school is also reflected in the ways space is organised, starting in the principal's office. Ann pushed her desk against the wall and opened up a space where teachers, parents and children could meet her in a level, open space in the middle of the room. Then she invited teachers to paint their doors, for 'your door says something about you; what you have on

your door says something about you'. The colourfulness of the school, with its wide open spaces, with animals and toys, helps reinforce its warm climate. This means democratising all learning spaces, including the library, where a mother, her son and daughter often do homework together after school.

The parents of Red constantly refer to the school climate as making a lasting impression on them. Several of them referred to the 'ethos' of the school, and its underlying value system, as described in the following quote by a teacher:

> *I taught for 31 years at seven different schools. Then I came to teach here starting in 2007. What is it about PNP that stands out like a sore thumb? It is values-driven, our whole ethos is about catching kids doing things right. Ann is always trying to take on new things. We had a meeting yesterday, transform to perform, and what is it based on? Values. So we tell the children about the five values here. PNP does this all the time, in assembly every Monday, the seven habits, like, 'What habit did you break?' we ask children who are fighting. After 31 years, I also taught in the States; it is definitely the values of the school that makes it different.*

The school is also distinctive for those parents who come from outside of South Africa, like this German mother:

> *What I liked about the school is definitely the ethos. Coming from a different country, this school offered what I did not find at the other schools. One of the biggest decision makers was about the ethos of the school, and that they really do focus on creating responsible citizens for the country, for the context within which we live.*

## What's next for Red School?

Given the widespread affirmation of Red School—its ethos, climate, pedagogy, curriculum and culture—what is next for this model school? The parents of Red School begin with an acknowledgement of the one constant associated with this model school—change. This is a school whose leadership has taken on the challenge of change with courage. In that spirit, some parents speak openly about the next phase in the transformation of Red School, and that

has to do with the deepening of the change project. And the most obvious starting point is the diversity of the teaching staff: 'I still sit with a bit of discomfort. I still think there are not enough black African teachers at the school for my kids to get their heads around [the fact] that whiteness isn't the standard.'

Another parent agreed:

> *The danger of being perceived as this role model school is this: We have no black teachers except the Xhosa teacher, and that does not put us far ahead of the leafy suburbs schools. I recognise that it is difficult, and I know that is one of the things that Ann is passionate about. It's not easy, but we're not there.*

The striking thing is that these concerns are expressed by the white parents of Red School, who see the need for a deeper engagement with systemic racism beyond the liberal notions of inclusion and embrace. The following are parent voices on this subject:

> *I grew up in a fairly open family and for many years I was colour-blind, working in the townships and stuff, but it is only in the last five years that I came to understand the need to actively dismantle systems, not just that we are all the same—that our situations are unjust—and to teach my children that someone with a different skin colour or sexual orientation or gender has a different life experience, and we can be part of undoing that.*

> *And that's where I would like to see Pinelands North heading next, moving beyond 'we embrace everyone' to almost raising activists, who can recognise a system and 'we are going to question that and we are not going to be part of that' and dismantle it, somehow come to build something new; even more diversity in the teaching staff.*

This desire among parents for attention to structural racism was also expressed in relation to the curriculum, with sentiments similar to those expressed on university campuses in 2015–2016 under the banner of decolonisation:

> *I would love my children to be exposed to African artists, African poets and African musicians in the various spaces of the school. Because I think that this idea that white is better and black is less is so ingrained. Even in my family, where I have people who were in detention fighting apartheid, you cannot help but absorb that challenge, and that is the sense I get from a lot of parents who have chosen to be here. Actively taking down racism, not just embracing each other.*

This core group of parents, working with a responsive principal, recognises these deeper challenges of transformation as the next steps in Red School's evolution as a model school. It has done much—'the building blocks for these conversations have been made at Pinelands North', as noted by a parent—but it is not there yet, and simply that recognition of unfinished business and the desire to move the school from racial inclusion to social justice is exactly what makes Red School such an exemplary South African school.

There are few, if any, other schools in South Africa where white parents would argue that 'the next step for [the school] is to help our children see the water that they swim in', so that their offspring can learn that 'black people are poor because whites stole their land' and that without 'some kind of racial literacy the notion that everyone's equal and that we don't see colour is dangerous'.

While the parents and teachers at Red School recognise and admire the bold and courageous leadership vision of Ann, they all point as well to the distributed leadership that she enables at the school. The parents are asked not only to participate but to take charge, as in the development of the new strategic plan. As she does with the children, Ann takes her parents seriously. Some notice that Ann is 'able to unite so many different people behind her vision', and even then 'she does not make it about her and allows herself to be influenced by others'. It is how she builds on the diverse strengths of her teachers, parents and administrators that conveys a sense of shared leadership. As one parent put it, 'I've been very appreciative that the school is not made up of 50 Anns!' In the process, observes a teacher and parent at Red School, 'Ann finds the people to make things happen.'

## Closing

A boy rushes down the passage and Principal Ann, turning from her guests, shouts after him with a loud, hearty voice: 'Morning Josh! I really do miss teaching you so much.'

# CHAPTER 9

# Why Does South Africa Still Have Majority-White Schools?

*Don't tell me there is racism in your society; tell me what sustains it.*
—Edward Said, Palestinian scholar and activist,
Cape Town, February 2001

## Introduction

The scenery could not have been more stunning on this late summer's morning early in 2001. It was, after all, the famous Kirstenbosch National Botanical Garden on the eastern slopes of Table Mountain in Cape Town. Inside one of the conference venues, South Africans, along with some international guests, were assembled for a *saamtrek* ('pulling together') on values in education. One after the other, speakers held forth on racism in schools and society. It was barely seven years since the end of legal apartheid. Then, in the question-and-answer session, a visibly frail but still intellectually sharp Edward Said stood up and issued this challenge: 'Don't tell me there is racism in your society; tell me what sustains it.' It was as if someone had suddenly pricked the balloon of South African agitation with the enduring legacy of a very recent past.

This final chapter is less concerned with the micropolitics of school admissions—what schools do to retain their white dominance—but rather with what sustains such settled patterns of segregation in South Africa's elite and middle-class schools.

## A negotiated settlement

Apartheid came to end through negotiations, a series of agreements between the apartheid state and the liberation movements, principal among them being Nelson Mandela's African National Congress (ANC). Inside the multiparty constitutional negotiations of the 1990s, there was a subset of talks about education. 'The education talks nearly scuttled the constitutional negotiations,' recalled party leaders on both sides of the political divide

(Personal communication with De Klerk, 13 March 2019). Those talks certainly held the promise of a negotiated settlement. The stakes were high. As then President FW de Klerk has recounted in a conversation with one of the authors:

> Die onderwysonderhandelinge, naas dié oor Artikel 25, die beskerming van eiensdomsreg, was twee van die grootste haakplekke gewees in die onderhandelinge wat eers op die laaste moment uitgestryk is.
>
> *[The education negotiations, alongside Article 25 on the protection of property rights, were two of the largest stumbling blocks in the negotiations which were resolved only at the last moment.]* (Personal communication, 13 March 2019)

If the outgoing white government was going to share political power through a Government of National Unity (GNU), it would press for certain guarantees through the Interim Constitution of 1993 (No 200 of 1993) in the year before South Africa's first democratic elections. The *education* guarantees were captured in what was called Section 247 of the Interim Constitution, under the subheading Special Provisions regarding Existing Educational Institutions:

> *(1) The national government and provincial governments as provided for in this Constitution shall not alter the rights, powers and functions of the governing bodies … under laws existing immediately before the commencement of this Constitution unless an agreement resulting from bona fide negotiations has been reached with such bodies and reasonable notice of any proposed alteration has been given.* (RSA 1993: Section 247[1])

The Interim Constitution stipulated that should agreement not be reached, the government could change these rights, powers and functions, 'provided that interested persons and bodies shall be entitled to challenge the validity of such alteration in terms of this Constitution' (RSA 1993: Section 247[3]). Strangely enough, those rights would not be challenged during the years of the GNU. When challenges came, it was long afterwards, in court processes

on matters of language of instruction in majority-white Afrikaans schools, where there was a press to open schools to non-Afrikaans students (the Mikro Primary School case), and on the admission of individual students beyond the class-size limits set by the school (the Rivonia Primary School case). In none of these court cases was there ever a national challenge to the authority of school governing bodies (SGBs) with respect to the admissions policies of their schools (Serfontein & De Waal 2013).

Back inside the constitutional negotiations, the high-stakes educational talks included questions about language. The protection of Afrikaans was a central aspect of both the constitutional and education negotiations for the National Party of FW de Klerk:

> Rondom die onderwys-onderhandelinge was die klem gewees op die kwessie van moedertaalonderwys, die reg op moedertaalonderwys. Om dit ingeskryf te kry, het baie onderhandelinge gevat en om binne my ondersteuningsbasis dit gevestig te kry, was daar baie onderhandelinge.
>
> *[With respect to educational negotiations the emphasis was on the question of mother-tongue instruction, the right to mother-tongue instruction. To get this included took many negotiations and to have this supported by my base of support took much negotiation.]* (Personal communication, 13 March 2019)

The politics of mother-tongue instruction, however, mainly affected the white Afrikaans schools. This was not a contested issue within black schooling, nor did the white English schools expect any other outcome than the continued privilege of using English as the language of administration, instruction and everyday communication. De Klerk, the last white president, was advised by some of his senior colleagues that the constitutional guarantees for languages, including Afrikaans, were not going to work. And he concedes that this is evident in the fate of Afrikaans at the former white universities (personal communication, 13 March 2019). There was, however, an equally pressing matter in the transition from apartheid—the rights of SGBs.

This question came to a head during the days of the GNU (1994–1999) when, around 1995, the first Minister of Education under Nelson Mandela's presidency, Professor Sibusiso Bhengu, brought a new Education Bill to

the attention of Cabinet. At that time, the two deputy presidents (De Klerk and Thabo Mbeki) under the GNU would alternate as chairs of the Cabinet meetings; Mandela left this task to his deputies. A fight was looming:

> *In the design of the original concept law that he brought to Cabinet, the rights of parent associations were diluted* (afgewater). *I remember clearly the day this was discussed in the Cabinet meeting. Thabo Mbeki was in the chair. We had an arrangement, since we were both smokers, as well as other Cabinet ministers, to call for a smoke break. I called for it and confronted Bhengu on the question of the rights of parent bodies. In that smoke break he made concessions that satisfied us. Afterwards the Schools Act was approved.* (Personal communication, 13 March 2019)

The rights of parent associations, or SGBs, as they came to be called, were now protected. While Section 247 of the Interim Constitution was dropped with the adoption of the final Constitution in 1996, the SGBs retain their significant powers over admission to this day. This was a crucial victory for De Klerk and his white constituency, but a greater gain lay ahead, according to the erstwhile president: 'If you look at the Interim Constitution (1993) and the final one that was approved (1996), not much has changed in those arrangements.' Why did the ANC-led majority in the government not change these arrangements?

> *You must remember there were 34 immutable principles with which the Constitution had to comply. This new Constitution in fact had to go to the Constitutional Court to certify that those principles were adhered to. So the ANC with its large majority could not really mess around* (peuter) *because they were bound to those principles.* (Personal communication, 13 March 2019)

It is indeed the case that the Interim Constitution listed 34 'constitutional principles' that provided a framing template within which decisions about the future of South Africa would be made. At the same time, these principles offered political reassurances to other parties that the ANC would not use its majority to override minority interests. So, for example, those protective clauses included the following:

- *XI: The diversity of language and culture shall be acknowledged and protected, and conditions for their promotion shall be encouraged.*
- *XIV: Provision shall be made for participation of minority political parties in the legislative process in a manner consistent with democracy.*
- *XV: Amendments to the Constitution shall require special procedures involving special majorities.* (RSA 1993: Schedule 4)

The ANC-led government did not change the rights of SGBs that had been established as part of the principled commitments made under the GNU and captured in the Interim Constitution. In fact, in Section 6.17 of the Education White Paper 2 (DoE 1996), titled *The Organisation, Governing and Funding of Schools*, the ANC Minister of Education went to great lengths to defend the terms of the Section 247 negotiations and to reassure the public, in Section 6.24, that '[a]ll public schools will be governed by representative governing bodies with substantial powers and responsibilities for the good conduct of their schools' (DoE 1996:42).

In short, the political settlement of the early 1990s guaranteed substantial powers for SGBs that have remained undisturbed throughout the days of the GNU in 1994 into the period following the adoption of the final Constitution in 1996 and on into the present. Nothing changed, with the exception, of course, that the former white schools committed to 'the abolition of racial admissions criteria in educational institutions' (DoE 1996:4). The South African Schools Act (No 84 of 1996), passed in the same year, would confirm such authority over admissions by the SGB, but again with the now-routine commitments to non-discrimination:

> *5. Admission to public schools*
>
> *(1) A public school must admit learners and serve their educational requirements without unfairly discriminating in any way.*
>
> *(2) The governing body of a public school may not administer any test related to the admission of a learner to a public school, or direct or authorise the principal of the school or any other person to administer such test.*

> *(3) No learner may be refused admission to a public school on grounds that his or her parent—*
>
> *(a) is unable to pay or has not paid the school fees determined by the governing body […]*
>
> *(b) does not subscribe to the mission statement of the school; or*
>
> *(c) has refused to enter into a contract in terms of which the parent waives any claim for damages arising out of the education of the learner.* (RSA 1996:6)

As this book has shown, however, formally doing away with race as a criterion in admissions does not mean that race and racial dominance in enrolments cannot be retained through a spider's web of policies that achieves the same ends (see Chapter 2 for a summary). Race, in other words, can be managed as a political concern.

## The slow demise of race as the organising logic of admissions policies

The end of apartheid also meant the end of whites-only schools. White public schools were given an option as to how they would choose to open their schools to all races. By 1993 most white schools had settled for a semi-private model (called Model C). On the one hand, this model allowed for open access, with decreased funding from government; on the other hand, the schools gained increased autonomy over admissions and parents could be charged school fees. Crucially, there was no cap or limit on what SGBs could charge parents in the form of school fees.

The desegregation of schools did not, however, happen overnight. Already in the 1970s, during the heyday of apartheid, the Catholic independent schools were allowed to admit small numbers of black students into their institutions (Christie 1990). Then, as the country hurtled towards the end of apartheid, and as the illogic of racist legislation on everything from mixed marriages to residential group areas started to collapse, concessions were slowly made to allow black students into public schools. It started with a strange and little-known case in the small university town of Stellenbosch.

The US company Shell International sent an African American as its most senior executive appointment to apartheid South Africa. The family was adamant that they wanted their children admitted to a white girls' school

called Rhenish Primary School. As two senior bureaucrats from the white national education department recall:

> *It became a big issue because the school committee of the school (later called the governing body) was perfectly happy to admit this person's children to the school. There was no community resistance. But it was a problem for the principal because of the rules. But given the political profile [of the case] which could raise some sort of confrontation, bureaucrats in the Department of Education and Culture were instructed to find a way to make it possible for persons to be admitted to schools at the discretion of the governing body.* (Interview with Clive Roos and Dr Huw Davies, Cape Town, 28 January 2019)

Thus, Rhenish Primary became the first public school in South Africa to secure official permission to admit black students, albeit the children of a high-profile US businessman. The government department subsequently prepared a document that made it possible for school authorities who wished to admit black students to do so, in consultation with their communities. This decision created a loophole for other schools to admit individual black students—as was done at Grey High School in Port Elizabeth and Glenwood Boys' High School in Durban—so that 'for quite a long time, relatively speaking, this was perfectly happily managed' (Interview with Dr Huw Davies, Cape Town, 28 January 2019). These arrangements in the late 1980s and early 1990s were by no means an indication of a systemic change to the segregated school system, but they did start a practice in which small numbers of middle-class black students could be admitted as individuals through a process managed by school-level authorities. This is crucial for understanding how the admission of non-white students would proceed in the years after apartheid.

In the same way that admissions gradually opened up for children of other races, so too did school fees, over time, become part and parcel of the culture of the former white schools. White parents did not always pay for education. Under an old Cape Ordinance from the 1960s, it was 'unlawful for a school to ask from any one family more than R3 per child per year' (Interview with Dr Huw Davies, Cape Town, 28 January 2019), according to former senior officials from the apartheid-government education

department. Parents found ways around this proscription and established an 'arms-length trust mechanism' that allowed parents to make donations to schools: 'It opened up a whole Pandora's Box of alternative funding mechanisms. Schools got very smart about how to use those but until then they had not been allowed to charge a fee' (Interview with Clive Roos, Cape Town, 28 January 2019).

It was around this time, in the early 1990s, that those on the side of the ANC recognised that a truly equitable system of education would depend on white people paying a share of the costs of a reconstructed school system. Prominent figures in the movement started to talk about 'public–private partnerships', referring to parental contributions to a state-aided model of education. Already, there was talk about the rationalisation of teachers in the more privileged schools, ahead of an equitable allocation of limited state resources; coloured and white schools would have been particularly hard hit at that time (Vally & Tleane 2002).

The white English schools, through bodies such as the Open Schools Association and through the leadership of schools such as SACS, were considering a multiracial option for admissions. Leaders from these groups went to see the department officials, and it was at this time that Minister Piet Claase, representing white education, told his senior officials, 'These people have cash; who are we to tell them who they can and cannot admit to their schools' (Interview with Clive Roos, Cape Town, 28 January 2019). This was the beginnings of a strong and continuing link between the self-funding capacity of the former white schools and their right of control over admissions.

These debates and contentions within the white school community led seamlessly to the Model C option. The old government was willing to reduce funding to white schools, given the economic realities of equitable education, and, in exchange, to allow the SGBs to set their own fees and choose their own students. The political logic was that 'if you're making people pay, surely you must give them a degree of choice … if they want to choose open' (Interview with Dr Huw Davies, Cape Town, 28 January 2019).

Motivated by self-preservation, most schools would come to choose the state-aided Model C plan, in which they retained a base of government funding to keep their operations going, including teacher salaries, but could raise funds and choose the black students to whom they would offer admission. That locus of control over uncapped private funding, from

parents, and sole control over admissions without government interference, has remained unchanged for over 25 years.

## Keeping the middle classes in the public school system

But surely, one could argue, the ANC-led government could have changed these transitional arrangements to make the white, privileged schools more affordable, while at the same time opening up admissions to more disadvantaged students? After all, many other transitional agreements fell away when it came to aspects such as sharing power under the GNU or retaining Afrikaans as medium of instruction in schools and universities. It is something the former bureaucrats that helped devise these negotiated arrangements are also perplexed about:

> *We are now 25 years down the road, and you have to ask serious questions about the administration and management of education in the country as a whole. If only we had been able to take the entrenched white public school system down the path of opening [up] and accepting financial cuts and so on.*
>
> *Today we sit with the problem of admissions. It was never intended that the funding models survive 25 years. It had to be changed and evaluated along the way. Now we are sitting in this country with a real problem because the upper-end public schools have simply become unaffordable for lots of people, not just previously disadvantaged people.* (Interview with Clive Roos, Cape Town, 28 January 2019)

That these privileged arrangements still exist does not, however, answer the question of why a black-majority government has not changed the rules of funding or access. On this question the senior bureaucrats from the old system are clear: 'Politically, you have to ask whether the current arrangements have not suited many people' (Interview with Clive Roos, Cape Town, 28 January 2019). Who are these 'many people'? The black and white middle classes.

Deep within the political deliberations about the future of schools in South Africa was a concern about retaining the middle classes in the public education system (Crouch 2005:1; Fiske & Ladd 2004:58). The arguments during the transition years from apartheid to democracy were persuasive.

The middle classes gave respectability to an otherwise dysfunctional school system; take out those schools and systemic performance would look even more disastrous for the incoming government eager to establish its own legitimacy in building a strong public education system. Policies that capped private contributions through fees or that set quotas on black student admissions could easily see the white middle classes create their own independent schools or swell the ranks of existing non-state schools.

In addition, these schools provided, through their fee structures, a quasi-private public school system, in which the role of state financing was minimal. In theory, private funding of (white) public schools would release funds for the benefit of the large mass of disadvantaged schools. Retaining the middle classes in the public school system therefore meant making the kinds of compromises that, in consequence, allowed for a well-funded, advantaged set of schools that co-existed with a less well-funded, disadvantaged group of schools. The question remains: in whose interests?

## The black middle classes as a buffering force against desegregation

Given the parlous state of black schooling inherited from apartheid, the black middle classes would, without exception, enrol their children in the small pool of elite, former white schools. While the black middle class grew steadily after the end of apartheid, their numbers were still relatively small, but their earning power enabled them to buy houses in the former white suburbs and/or access high-fee schools in those catchment areas. Every politician, businessperson, academic, teacher, nurse and other professional placed their children in these former white schools.

The wealthy black classes could afford the most elite schools, while others could access the more stable middle-class schools, and those with less purchasing power could compete for places in the fragile middle-class schools. Once admitted, a bond of common interest developed between white and black middle-class parents—to maintain these former white institutions as highly selective schools in the suburbs.

None of this is surprising. New research has shown how black South African parents who access white-dominant schools as minorities hold back on criticism when it comes to the interests of their own children (Matentjie 2019). Black parents make calculations about risk when it comes to the well-being and continued enrolment of their offspring in white-dominant schools

and find ways other than direct confrontation to retain their attachment to the schools. Their class interests and the class prospects of their children are tied to their continued presence inside these white-dominant schools. An activist parent on the SGB of Ravenswood Girl's Junior School, an elite girls' school in the Southern Suburbs of Cape Town, found the same thing: 'Once you're included you keep quiet because, "Hey, I've been included so it can't be that bad." And of course, to retain that inclusion, you don't rock the boat. It's a very complex thing that we play, but we all know how it works if you're black.' This posture is, however, not only defensive in terms of the interests of the child but also offensive when it comes to the protection of the former white schools.

It was widely observed during the course of this research that, once their children are admitted, the black middle class often forms a buffer against the further desegregation of these former white schools. A white SGB parent who is an activist for change at Gunter Primary School encountered resistance from black parents: 'Comments go around the school [such as], "I brought my kids here so that they could talk like your kids and they would be taught like white people, because that is why they came to the school, and now you want to change things?"' This account captures the aspiration to gain not only academic education but also the social values and linguistic styles that together signify middle-class status—something a long-time scholar of desegregation in Durban schools calls 'white tone' (Hunter 2019). It is a status inside these schools that is built around not only abstract values and ways of speaking but also the material symbols of middle-class status, as one of the leaders of Ravenswood Girls' Junior School comments:

> *I think it is classism, even within our own school community … it's about classism in terms of 'I don't mind being your friend, it doesn't matter what colour, what religion, as long as you've also got a cellphone and we're going there [to the same places].' I think classism is more prevalent personally than racism.*

In the quest for white tone, however, the black middle class is intent not only on defending their newly found privileges, but also on preventing less fortunate black families from also accessing the schools. The charge 'now

you want to change things', quoted above, was aimed in part at suggestions of opening up a privileged school so that other black students could attend this institution.

For aspirational black families, their status nevertheless remains precarious, a phenomenon deployed by the political scientist Roger Southall (2016), who speaks of this class as 'the precariat'. Their new middle-class status can change at any time and must be constantly defended and pursued through institutions such as schools, as this comment during an interview with leaders of a prestigious girls' school reveals: 'I had an application the other day. It was from a Muslim man and he said to me: "I'm strongly motivating this application for my child. I come from a previous disadvantage."' Then this exchange happened:

> *School leader: Where did you go to school?*
> *Parent: I went to Westerford.*
> *School leader: Where did your wife go to school?*
> *Parent: She was also at Westerford with me.*

Which led the school leader to reflect as follows: 'So, I mean, how do you …? You want to say to him, "But that's not disadvantaged, that's an advantaged situation that you've been in, in terms of your schooling because other people haven't had that advantage in going to schools like that."' What the Muslim parent knows is that unless his child accesses this prestigious school, her middle-class prosperity is far from certain. What the school leader does not understand is that such status is not secured through one generation of a black family attending a former white school.

The making of a social class is actively produced and reproduced in the schools of the Southern Suburbs through their admissions policies. Rosenthal Boys' Preparatory School shows how such class discrimination happens in its differential treatment of black students:

> *There is a very strong Muslim community in this school, about 100 boys. We run a madrassa for them as well so that they can participate in the extramural programmes. [And then after you've done it] you sometimes think, 'Why didn't I think of that [earlier]?' So sometimes you can easily make changes without impacting the rest of the school.*

Contrast such accommodation of a middle-class black Muslim community with that of the treatment of poorer black African applicants to the same institution: 'We don't have the facility to take isiXhosa children and then to teach them English and then to teach them the curriculum. So it was also quite a sifting process.'

There might well be an element of racism at play as well, but what is clear is that those who can pay, access the school and navigate its culture, are accommodated as a class, while those who are less able to do so are prevented from passing through the gates. This observation again demonstrates how the assimilation process discriminates between the different classes of black students within the institution.

Black students who have gained access to former white schools accordingly play their role in buffering the system from less privileged entrants, and one way they do this is by moving towards schools where there are more white children. These finer distinctions of race and class are also made by black African middle-class families. When the principal of Redding Primary School went looking for black children, she found that

> *affluent black [African] families prefer to go to Peakrest because they know their children would have white children to play with more than coloured children … and it fitted with what we had experienced, because we kept having applications from coloured and white families but from very few black [African] families.*

Such concentrations of black and coloured middle-class families in the whitest schools fortify the status of the schools by leaving behind those deemed to have less social standing.

One specific area in which the black middle class asserts its authority is in the retention of white teachers. The perception is that black teachers are less competent than their white counterparts, and without the need for any evidence, black parents themselves resist having black teachers for their children. While it is the case that activist parents, such as members of the group Parents for Change at Ravenswood Girls' Junior School or parents at Gunter Primary School, have been agitating for the transformation of the teaching corps, many black parents insist on white teachers. At Warrington Preparatory School, the retiring white principal recalled parental reaction to her attempts to change the racial profile of the staff:

> *We don't have an isiXhosa teacher. I'll tell you why: because I would have a riot on my hands. We appointed Mrs Africa [a black teacher] when we opened up. Mrs Africa is fairer than I am, but I had a whole queue of parents at the office door telling me that they didn't want their children in her class—[these were] black parents.*
>
> *I said that she is one of the best teachers in the school, and they said to me that no, they want a white teacher in the class. Then we did have a teacher who came in to teach their children isiXhosa and the parents complained and asked that their children not go to isiXhosa lessons because they didn't pay for them to come here to get that.*

This clamour for white teachers by black parents is by no means restricted to fragile middle-class schools such as Warrington Preparatory. At the prestigious Ravenswood Girls' Junior School, the black parents were adamant when some parent activists pushed for change, as one SGB member recalls:

> *We have had many parents, black and coloured and Indian parents, say to us, 'What are you guys going on about? We want our kids to have white teachers, that's why we send them here.' So even black people believe in white competence. I mean, we all know that* 'Ja, Baas' *['Yes, Master'] mentality.*

The role of the black middle class as a buffering system to the desegregation of former white schools does, however, require explanation beyond the cases studied here.

## Interest convergence theory

The US legal scholar Derrick Bell (1980) argues that white Americans only allowed for the racial desegregation of white schools when the push for open schools by black citizens coincided with their own interests. So, for example, the landmark judgment of the US Supreme Court, *Brown v Board of Education* in 1954, came about, Bell (1980) argues, as a result of international pressure on the US government in the context of the Cold War to deal with the scourge of segregated education. In other words, geopolitical forces showed up the scandal of racial segregation and the government was forced to change the system of separate schooling for black and white students.

Writing from the perspective of critical race theory, Bell explains that, for the desegregation of schools to take place, it was required that white people see that such action is in their own best interests: 'That Whites in policymaking positions [were] able to see the economic and political advances at home and abroad that would follow abandonment of desegregation' (Bell 1980:524).

The question is, does interest convergence theory hold in the South African case, given what we now know about how schools change, or not, when it comes to desegregation in the post-apartheid context? To provide context for understanding Bell's theory, two important differences between the USA and South Africa are worth recalling.

First, the USA had a civil rights struggle, in which black people fought for inclusion in the dominant social arrangements that favoured white citizens; separate schooling was one area of contention within this struggle. By contrast, South Africa had a liberation struggle in which neither the apartheid government nor the anti-apartheid forces gained an outright victory. South Africans therefore had to negotiate the terms of transition towards democracy, and included in that was the fate of public schools. Also, crucially, the majority in the USA—then and now—is white, with black people forming a minority as they sought access to desegregated schools over the years. South Africa has a black-majority population whose children will always be accommodated in majority-black schools; the former white schools form a small minority of schools across the country.

What Bell's theory can explain in South Africa is the issue of converging interests. White and black interests converged powerfully in the post-apartheid period to cause the opening up of the privileged schools in the 1990s. In the course of the settlement negotiations, all sides could agree on admissions policies that were non-discriminatory, especially in racial terms; this was in the interests of the black majority. But white interests were secured in agreements that insisted on SGBs retaining their powers over admissions policies and the setting of school fees. Those converging interests, however, came about through protracted negotiations between warring parties.

However, Bell's theory has two major limitations in the South African context. First, his theory is classless. It cannot account for the powerful convergence of the class interests of the black middle classes and the racial interests of white South Africans. In other words, interest convergence theory cannot explain how a minority of middle-class black families come to gain access to, and defend, their admission to majority-white schools. Black

people are not a monolithic block of racial interests, as they are conceived of in Bell's work. Class analysis does not feature in his theoretical work, or for that matter in mainstream social science and education scholarship in the USA generally. Justin Driver, in his criticism of Bell's theory, comes close to making a similar point in the US social context when he argues that 'there is no singular Black agenda' (2011:166), and he correctly observes that black elites often benefit from their ties to the white establishment. What we still do not have, though, is a coherent explanation as to who within the black community enjoys access to the privileged schools and how the class interests of one group coincide with the racial interests of another group, resulting in white-dominant schooling.

Second, Bell's theory does not connect what governments do through law and policy (his focus) with what schools do in the design and conduct of their admissions policies. What the present research demonstrates is that what schools enact in the micropolitics of admissions is made possible by what government enables through the macropolitics of policy-making. At any stage in the more than two decades since the end of apartheid, the new democratic government could have changed the original agreements with respect to school funding or have acted more assertively in the transformation of admissions policies. This did not happen, because the privileged schools offer class mobility to the black elites, even as they entrench racial privilege for the white minority. Such an interconnected explanation for the persistence of white-dominant schools among the elite institutions is what this study contributes to the international scholarship on school (de)segregation.

## How schools change at the confluence of politics and policy in democratic South Africa

What does this research reveal about the politics, problems and possibilities of change? It depends, first of all, on which category of the former white schools one is talking about.

The fragile middle-class schools have changed completely, by resegregating from all-white to majority-coloured schools (except in the peculiar case of Clinton Primary School, which became an African-majority school, as explained in Chapter 7). As we have seen, the reasons for resegregation include the relatively low fees of these schools and their proximity to coloured residential areas, either directly or via public transport routes. In selected cases, the change of language policy from Afrikaans to English, because of demographic pressures,

accelerated the process of resegregation. These were the schools where white flight, often in the direction of the Afrikaans-speaking Northern Suburbs, was most acute. This set of abandoned white schools attracted mainly the children of lower-middle-class and working-class families and were given a wide berth by the black middle classes. Here the change in racial enrolments was a function of social forces beyond the control of the schools.

The stable middle-class schools, by virtue of moderately high fees and the strict application of zoning requirements, are able to exercise much more control over the change process. Here, change is managed through the admissions policy, in light of the high demand for places from parents who can afford the fees, on the one hand, and who live within range of the school, on the other. These are also the schools that extend the catchment area according to their needs, for example to include more black girls in a girls' school or more white male students in a co-educational school.

It is also such schools that are more directly challenged by parents to transform, since they already enrol anywhere from 20 to 40 per cent black students. The major political question in these schools, however, is the dearth of black teachers, and this is where discontent often breaks out in the media, with considerable embarrassment to the school, as in the cases of Ravenswood Girls' Junior School and Spruce Girls' School. Given the visible numbers of black students, the stable middle-class schools are also the ones more likely to be challenged by the students themselves in terms of the institutions' 'white cultural standards'.

The elite schools, with their excessively high school fees, do not experience much pressure for change. Their school fees alone put them out of reach of the black middle classes, and the very few wealthy black families who can afford to send their children there are too few in number, if not also uninterested, to make any demands for transformation.

If change is pressed at all, it is therefore in the stable middle-class schools, where there are small but visible numbers of black students in schools that are white in terms of teachers, school culture and often learner enrolments. In two cases—Gunter Primary School and Ravenswood Girls' Junior School—the role of parents was crucial in the press for transformation. How successful were these activist groups in demanding changes in the admissions policies of the schools? It is worth taking a closer look at two different approaches to transforming the schools of the Southern Suburbs when it comes to admissions policy and the appointment of black teachers.

## The case of Gunter Primary School

Dee Leach is one of the persistent activists at Gunter Primary pushing for change. She serves on the SGB and took part in a review and audit of the school's admissions policy:

> *I want to see change in the student body, the learner body, but that's not actually my most passionate thing. My background is in language education; I just finished my PhD. So obviously my passion in terms of transformation, the racial demographics of the school changing is less important to me than things like language policy. So I think actually the admissions policy out of those two things is the easier [one] to fix.*

Gunter Primary School is changing because of the interventions of Dee as a white parent, but she does not have it all her way: 'I've got a daughter who lives in Gugulethu who hasn't gotten into the school despite her mother being on the SGB, and so it's a very personal thing as well.' The complexity of an adopted child living in the township goes undiscussed. Admissions, however, remains one of her priorities. Fourteen spaces in the incoming class were filled up according to the admissions criteria—proximity to the school, siblings and so forth, after which about 11 to 14 places were still open. 'Why are seven of those [admitted] white?' Dee would ask. She continues: 'Heritage was a point of contention, but we argued that in the current climate you cannot even have that word in your policy. Arguments were made that they give us money. But we just said that we cannot. So, it's out now.'

This window into the tussles between members of the school governing authorities shows the influence of progressive parents pushing for change, even when confronted with arguments for retaining one of the pillars of admissions, such as heritage privilege. One issue that has not been resolved is whether South African citizens should get priority over foreign nationals; it is a complicated situation, in which the status of the foreign nationals could vary from permanent residents to those awaiting study permits.

An important part of the struggle was over who had the final say in admissions. As noted earlier, principals generally have an overly dominant role in admissions decisions. The activist parents at Gunter Primary saw this as problematic and gained an important concession:

> *The principal was in the policy as having the final say. Now we have changed that to principal and two designated from the staff, so that it's not only one making the decision. There's such a lot of work in making admission choices.*

Slowly but surely, the school changed beyond the tipping point (see Chapter 7) observed in other schools, a point of particular interest to the research team:

> *Researcher: How do parents know? Don't they get jittery when white enrolments fall below 50 per cent?*
> *Dee: They don't know that it's fallen below 50 per cent.*

The story of Gunter Primary School is one of activist parents working within the structures of the school and pushing for change. It was not easy, for 'the conversations that happened in our admissions audit was so conflictual and robust … those conversations and the listening that took place were what made the change in the past few years in the demographics, not the policy', as Dee noted.

In the process, the authority of the principal became a shared authority with the staff and the parents. There were indications that the admissions audit was not popular with the school management at first, and there were, as recounted, robust exchanges with the governance authority of the school. But in the end, the change happened, incrementally but steadily, through parental activism, as the following quote by Dee shows:

> *I must say, just to make sure that I have stated it strongly enough, this work, which I know is unprecedented … would not have happened if it was not for a group of parents who fought quite hard to get an audience with management. It was a tough meeting and it was not easy for them. It was because of that meeting that management agreed to have an audit … Parents don't realise the power [they have].*

## The case of Ravenswood Girls' Junior School

While individual activist parents at Gunter Primary School worked within the school structures, namely the SGB, to press for change, a coalition of parents at Ravenswood Girls' Junior School took the fight to the streets. Parents for Change came into being in 2017, when it became clear to the group that 'the

school was not serious about transformation inclusivity' (Davids 2018) and after three members of the SGB resigned in protest. The concerns of this activist group were about the lack of black teachers, the cultural alienation of black learners within the school and the admissions policy. At Ravenswood Girls' Junior, argued a parent activist, 'in spite of a residential area which was shifting demographically, the school somehow found reason to have a lower intake of black learners' (Davids 2018).

Incidentally, this last point is, of course, pertinent to a central thesis of this book—that it is not one policy instrument, such as proximity to the school, that determines 'who gets in', but the interconnectedness of a spider's web of policies that function together to retain the status quo. The activist's complaint that 'the school somehow found reason' can therefore be explained within the conceptual frame offered in this study.

Like the transformation activists at Gunter Primary School, the members of Parents for Change included both black and white parents, which demonstrates that these concerns were shared more broadly in the school community. The group was keenly aware of the fact that while they might have been racially inclusive, they were decidedly a minority within the predominantly white school community. This is what made it difficult for the activist parents to gain a significant voice on the SGB to press their demands for change. The difficulty experienced by progressive parents or by black parents in gaining membership of SGBs is a longstanding complaint in former white schools, as a parent activist explains:

> *The problem with SGBs, and this is not unique to Ravenswood Girls' Junior, [is that] if you don't have a critical mass of parents to support you, you will not get elected onto that governing body. We have nominated key people whom we felt needed to be on the governing body and who were serious about transformation, and those people simply did not get the vote. So you basically end up with an all-white governing body.* (Davids 2018)

The frustration of being outnumbered by white parents within the main policy-making body of a former white school is what led to the decision of three SGB members to resign and form part of Parents for Change. It was a decision heavily criticised by other parents, who argued that by taking their complaints to the street, Parents for Change were 'causing reputational harm to the school' (Davids 2018).

Their cause nevertheless received some attention when a storm broke in the media about the first black African teacher at the school leaving her post after a disagreement with the authorities. From the school's point of view, the teacher was not competent to teach, despite interventions to assist her. From the teacher's perspective, she was unfairly removed from her position. As far as the parent group was concerned, this teacher's case was simply an example of a school culture that is alienating for black teachers and students.

It is more difficult to assess how much impact this group has had on changes to the admissions policy or staffing at the school compared to the case of Gunter Primary School. To be sure, their very public challenge that there was a lack of transformation was initially denied by the school authorities, and their charges of discrimination in teacher appointments dismissed by the provincial head of education. Nevertheless, shortly after the controversy surrounding the departure of the black teacher, the first non-white principal in the history of the school was appointed at Ravenswood Girls' Junior School. However, little seems to have changed in the school's admissions policy, and some families have removed their children from the school because of the lack of transformation (Davids 2018), suggesting that the school successfully held its ground against activist parents seeking more rapid change. How do those resisting parents explain the status quo?

## The power of common sense

None of the former white schools of the Southern Suburbs considers its admissions policies racist; in fact, they would be offended at the suggestion. So how do these elite and stable middle-class schools defend policies that ensure majority-white enrolments in an overwhelmingly black country and province and against the backdrop of apartheid segregation? What this research found was a compelling appeal to common sense as the overriding explanation for 'the way things are'. Common sense becomes a way of evading charges of racism by appealing to what reasonable people would agree to be a sensible way of making decisions about who gets in and who is excluded. Common sense, so applied, assumes, of course, a perfect society in which chances are equally distributed.

Indeed, it is the case that in the interviews with the schools, most principals and governors present their admissions policies as considered, reasonable and even, just in the context of the school's history, location and mission. Furthermore, every school defends its policies as being aligned

with various national and provincial policies governing admissions. The next four paragraphs detail routine justifications for the admissions policies of the various schools.

That the school chooses students from the surrounding suburbs because 'this is a community school' is a common refrain. When students have to travel great distances to access the school—such as children from working-class neighbourhoods—this is an unnecessary burden on young children and it also excludes them from after-school activities, since the taxis take them home immediately after formal lessons end. The school must be fair in its admissions policies towards those families living in the immediate vicinity; after all, the school is complying with government policy in this regard.

The admission of siblings strengthens the concept of a community school by keeping the family together. It would be unfair to ask parents to drop one child at School A and the other at School B. It would be inconvenient, quite apart from breaking up the family unit. Similarly, recognising heritage is also a way of retaining the loyalty of families over generations, which is in turn rewarded through donations to the school. These are bonds that are important to nurture for the family, as well as for the school.

The school needs to levy high fees because government has over time reduced its contribution to the operations of former white schools. In order to keep classes small, and therefore offer more effective, individualised instruction, the school needs to hire more teachers, and this means raising the school fees. What distinguishes the school is its extra-curricular activities (such as hockey, water polo, music) and special programmes (such as computer laboratories, drama, art education) and all of this requires additional funding available only from parent contributions. Parents must be available to participate in the life of the school, whether it is in the form of homework support at home or professional skills (such as coaching) at the school.

The school has standards and therefore has to apply admissions tests to decide whether applicants would be able to reach those requirements or not. It is unfair to take children who then fail and become frustrated in their endeavours at the school. Similarly, the school has certain social norms and values that would be disrupted by a child who has a history of unacceptable behaviour recorded by the sending school. The reputational harm to the school would be immense, and once a child is taken in, it is very hard to evict that student.

All of these *internal narratives* (they are seldom made public) held within the school community become powerful justifications for selection policies. The problem, of course, is that these internal rationales, built on the notion of common sense, assume a level playing field. The absurdity of such a position is captured in this exquisite reasoning by a judge in favour of an instance of court-ordered desegregation of schools in the USA:

> *All things being equal, with no history of discrimination, it might well be desirable to assign pupils to schools nearest their homes. But things are not equal in a system that has been deliberately constructed and maintained to enforce racial segregation. The remedy for such segregation may be administratively awkward, inconvenient, and even bizarre in some situations, and may impose burdens on some; but all awkwardness and inconvenience cannot be avoided.* (Hannah-Jones 2019)

Common sense has two faces. Antonio Gramsci used the Italian translation of common sense, '*senso commune*', to refer to both its transformative power as well as 'its contradictory nature' and 'how it helps reproduce and maintain existing power regimes' (Crehan 2011:273, 281). Seen through this lens, the admissions policies of the elite schools—such as defending the notion of community schools— make good sense, but at the same time act to reproduce the racial privileges of former white institutions. Many of the common-sense arguments are based on middle-class sensibilities and capabilities that assume for working-class parents the same resources (financial, educational, social, cultural and occupational) available to privileged parents (Soudien 2004). It is assumed, for example, that a poor parent has a car, can take time off from work to participate in after-school programmes, has the basic education to enable them to assist with homework, and can pay the substantial deposit or full fee to enrol a child in Grade R.

Common sense is not necessarily wrong, as the US curriculum theorist Michael Apple explains; it is simply that 'this sense of contradictory impulses—good and bad—[exist] in tension with each other' (2014:xxx). What schools defend with some facility is the reasonableness of their admission policies; what they do not recognise as easily is the exclusionary power of those same decisions on those without the privilege of residence and resources to access these islands of privilege in the post-apartheid school system.

It does not help that those internal narratives, founded on common sense, gain their legitimacy from state-sanctioned policies. This echoes a warning issued in much earlier studies of racial desegregation in South African schools, namely that 'policies and reforms must be made carefully, or even once they are repealed their legacy may live on as landscapes of inequity and exclusion' (Brook 1996:228).

## Conclusion

What can be gleaned from this research about the prospects for significant and meaningful change in the former white schools of South Africa? There is no evidence to suggest that anything approaching US-type 'court-ordered desegregation' is likely to come the way of the majority-white schools, for three main reasons.

One, by admitting *some* black students the former white schools can claim to be non-discriminatory, even non-racist, when it comes to the admission of black children. Those student numbers can be increased within some range to demonstrate responsiveness to political concerns without fundamentally altering the majority status of white students or white teachers. These schools claim to be in compliance with both the Constitution and with national and provincial policies when it comes to their admissions policies.

Two, because these majority-white schools form a small percentage (less than 10 per cent) of the total number of public schools in the country (some 26 000), there is no political pressure to change the few well-resourced schools that provide quality education for the children of the black elites. As this book has shown, there is no inclination among those in power in politics, business, education or the broader public service to ruin the schools that still offer the black middle classes access to the best institutions.

Three, the obvious problem for policy-makers is that, even if every one of the former white schools became black-majority schools, the poor quality of education in the rest of the school system remains. In the USA, by contrast, most of the nation's schools are white-dominant and therefore political and legal pressures to include minorities in greater numbers do not alter the majority status of schools in that country.

All of this raises the interesting question of whether the initiatives to do away with zoning in Gauteng, driven by the activist head of education in that province, would effectively end the powerful effects of residential catchment requirements on enrolments in the former white schools. New regulations

on school admissions would extend the feeder zones from a radius of 5 km to 30 km from the school. However, there is no evidence that these widely proclaimed efforts to end the geography of apartheid schooling would have any effect on the balance of enrolments in the public and private schools of South Africa's wealthiest province. Why not?

This study has shown that what keeps the privileged suburban schools majority-white institutions is a spider's web of interconnected policies, not simply one policy, such as existing zoning arrangements. Even if zoning were completely erased as a factor in admissions, a poor black parent would still have to find the money to pay the high costs of tuition. If that parent applied for tuition exemption, they would have to have knowledge of such governmental assistance and hope that the school would make such information available. Then, assuming the parent applies, the child would still have to compete with children higher on the list because of sibling and, where it applies, heritage status. Even then, a parent would have to hope and pray that their child is not excluded on the basis of social selection measures, which include parents' professions, the family's capacity to pay and reports on behaviour from the sending school. In the unlikely event that the child is admitted, the parent then has to weigh the additional costs of sending the successful student to a school far away, including taxi fare and non-tuition in-school costs. Finally, should a family manage to cross all these hurdles to a successful admission, there is no guessing what the final decision might be, given that in many of the sampled schools the principal makes the final decision at their discretion. The notion, therefore, that lifting one restriction on admissions, such as zoning, would end apartheid-era segregation of schools is nothing less than political deception when it comes to the choices facing poor and working-class families.

Indeed, the critical insight of relevance from this study is the flexibility of the spider's web in the face of change and its durability beyond that. This is what Jerome Karabel calls 'the iron law of admissions', meaning that a school or university (in his study) 'will retain a particular admissions policy so long as it produces outcomes that correspond to institutional interests' (2005:2).

What this research has further shown is that the micropolitics of admissions to former white schools is not only very complex, but also enabled by the macropolitics of post-apartheid society. This considered description of *settled patterns of integration* is meant to suggest that these arrangements will not be easily changed in the elite and stable middle-class schools.

The more likely path to a deeper transformation of former white schools, under these conditions, is likely to come from activism *within* these institutions, but this depends on more and more white parents understanding that the opening up of schools to more black students and teachers is in the best interests of all children, and of society as a whole.

A more deeply transformed school system does not have to—and should not—mean the displacement of a white majority by a black majority, whether in the student population or the teaching corps. The resegregation of certain schools does not in any way advance the cause of school integration, where the social and academic benefits of living and learning together as black and white, the privileged and the poor, are lost again (Vandeyar & Jansen 2008).

There is, fortunately, an example in this study of how this can be achieved when three goals are held in balance—racial diversity in student and staffing demographics, high-quality teaching and learning, and the affordability of school fees. Red School in Pinelands is such an exemplar for former white schools. However, this model of racial integration is only possible with the support of the majority of parents and exceptional school leadership acting in tandem.

What is clear is that street-level activism is unlikely to change the admissions policies of former white schools, as the case of Ravenswood Girls' Junior School shows. But what if poor parents themselves descended on and took over the former white schools? In 2019, a group of parents and students from a dilapidated township school did in fact march on an affluent white school in the Eastern Cape city of King William's Town (Linden 2019). Schornville Primary, the township school, is made of prefabricated materials and enrols a massive 1 200 students in Grades 1 to 7; a student was alleged to have fallen through the floor of this school. There were two intriguing observations from this march on a former white school. First, there was no broader political support for the taking over of a white-dominant school from either the unions or the major political parties. Second, the stated intention was simply to draw attention to the plight of the township school. It was reported that '[p]arents say they will be sending their children to Kingsridge and Dale Primary until the Department of Education builds them a proper school' (Linden 2019).

Given the political economy of education in South Africa, the more likely pathway for transformation in the elite and middle-class schools is that schools will change slowly within parameters that keep the culture, the

class and the composition of teachers and students predominantly white. From time to time, schools will be jolted into stronger action as a result of a public crisis, as was the case during the hair protests at Sans Souci Girls' High School in the Southern Suburbs.

When such public embarrassment happens because of the lack of transformation, the stronger schools will survive and make marginal changes, under pressure, without significantly changing the overall trajectory of student admissions or teacher appointments; this was the case at schools such as Ravenswood Girls' Junior School and Spruce Girls' School when public criticism drew attention to the lack of transformation. Weaker schools will, under pressure, change completely, in ways that, as in the case of Sans Souci Girls' High, encourages further white flight and its resegregation into effectively a majority-black school.

Stronger schools are financially stable and academically competitive in the ecology of Southern Suburbs institutions. Weaker schools are less well resourced and academically average, in terms of scholastic results. Stronger schools tend to have more white students from affluent families; weaker schools are more likely to have majority-black student bodies, having already reached a tipping point in enrolments even before a publicised crisis.

In conclusion, the *settled arrangements* of white-dominant schools in post-apartheid society will continue, for the simple reason that such institutions serve the racial interests of white parents, which happen to converge with the class interests of the black elites. It is among these schools that the spider's web is strongest.

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