



Schooling choice in South Africa: The limits of qualifications and the politics of race, class and symbolic power



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ABSTRACT

From the 1980s many school authorities across Europe and North America made efforts to enhance 'parental choice' over schooling. In South Africa, by contrast, it was racial desegregation in the early 1990s that unleashed the movement of thousands of children to attend non-local schools. While it was predictable that 'black' children would travel to attend better-resourced schools from which they were previously barred few anticipated that 'white' children would travel so much to attend different public schools. The paper centers on explaining a related paradox: primary school children move more than secondary schooling children from a formerly 'black' part of the city; while from a formerly 'white' part of the city, secondary school children move more than primary school children. Drawing on archival sources, life histories of guardians and pupils, and interviews with schoolteachers, the paper develops this finding to argue that the large expansion of schooling has devalued qualifications such that some schools play a greater role in providing symbolic and social capital—for example a prestigious English language accent and old boys' networks. In an era of mass education, one that in the global South coincided with decolonization, new forms of differentiation beyond qualifications are becoming critical sites of class formation.

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1. Introduction

Schools in apartheid South Africa were racially segregated and resourced extraordinarily unequally. In the 1960s black 'African' children received one-tenth the level of school funding as 'white' students, echoing the infamous words of Henrik Verwoerd that there was no place for Africans '... above the level of certain forms of labor.'¹ As apartheid crumbled in the early 1990s, the era of divided schooling ended and, after democracy in 1994, the state passed legislation explicitly banning racial discrimination in the admissions process. Centered on Durban, the country's third largest city, this study explores educational change in a poorly

funded 'African'-designated township and two formerly 'white'-designated areas.

At one level the article documents a somewhat predictable pattern: that children from the historically black Umlazi township travel northwards—i.e. toward central Durban—to attend better-funded schools previously reserved for coloured, Indian or white students. But the article also shows that white children are traveling significantly to attend public schools, especially at the secondary school level. It demonstrates that black children travel most frequently at the primary school level ostensibly to access English-medium schools, while in the white areas greater movement takes place at the secondary level as white students concentrate in a few select schools in ways that enhance their social capital. It develops these findings to make a wider point: schooling after apartheid is increasingly important to not only gaining qualifications but symbolic capital (especially English language) and social capital (especially social networks).

This study adds to existing work on class and race in South Africa. Some of the key writings on class in South Africa, utilizing a broadly Weberian approach, have drawn upon labor and household data to show how some black South Africans advanced occupationally from the 1970s (for instance into semi-skilled or supervisory positions) and yet unemployment increased significantly. Thus

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¹ Figures from Bell and McKay (2011: 32). Verwoerd, as quoted in Hyslop (1999) who provides, along with Kallaway (2002), key overviews of this period. By the end of the apartheid era there were four widely used 'racial' categories: African, white, Indian, and coloured. I use the uppercase for African and Indian since the words are derived from geographic places. I use scare quotes conservatively to improve the article's readability.

there has been a reduction in *inter-racial* inequalities and increase in *intra-racial* inequalities (see particularly Crankshaw, 1997; Seekings and Natrass, 2005). As the most prestigious desegregated schools began to charge higher fees, the schooling literature found that the system became more ‘marketised’ (Tikly and Mabogoane, 1997) and, in turn, propelled the rise of ‘class apartheid’ (Bell and McKay, 2011). In other words, while some black students were ‘assimilated’ into the best schools, the majority continued to attend poorly performing institutions (see Chisholm, 2004; Dolby, 2001; Fiske and Ladd, 2004; Lemon, 1994; Soudien, 2012). The Bourdieuan frame I use here adds to this literature by emphasizing *processes* of class formation—ones that are difficult to measure quantitatively. It does so through a small survey and interviews and combines research in both formerly white- and black-designated spaces. Below, the paper presents a general theoretical overview. It then introduces the location of research, Durban. After the research findings are presented, the article emphasizes how schools yield not only qualifications but social and symbolic capital, and then ends with some conclusions.

2. Background and literature

2.1. Schooling and inequalities: qualifications, social capital, and symbolic capital

There is now a sizable literature on whether schooling reduces or accentuates class inequalities (for a recent review see the special edition of *Oxford Review of Education*, Vol. 4, Issue 6). Education, Pierre Bourdieu, probably the most influential educational theorist, argues, is a powerful camouflage for privilege because, while appearing to reward merit and effort, a family’s social class endows children with ‘cultural capital’ in a ‘habitus’ that enables or disables them in their navigation of educational institutions (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Bourdieu, 1984). This work seeks to puncture the prevailing liberal democratic view that mass education reduces class inequalities.

But education inequalities are not only produced by middle class children being bestowed a sense of entitlement that benefits them in relation to poorer students. One of the reasons for this, again articulated most clearly by Pierre Bourdieu, is that the central outcomes of schools—qualifications—themselves are devalued the more people have them (Bourdieu, 1984). A further mechanism by which education produces privilege is by unevenly allotting what Bourdieu calls ‘symbolic capital’ and Gramsci (1971), with more emphasis on subaltern agency, identifies as the prestige that constitutes *hegemony*.² Social advantages, in this schema, rest on certain markers of difference that act as ‘profit[s] of distinction’ (Bourdieu, 2013: 297), for instance bodily mannerisms including the ability to communicate with a particular accent. A related way that education can reproduce inequalities is when they create sometimes lifelong networks (e.g. ‘old boy’ networks) that can help members to gain access to work or other social benefits. The UK’s private schools (more commonly termed ‘public schools’ in ways that suggest their interests are aligned with those of the nation as a whole) are perhaps the best example of a group of schools that incubate a social elite. Bourdieu argues that such elite networks benefit their members by providing social capital, defined as: ‘the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network . . . in other words, to membership in a group’ (Bourdieu, 1985, 21).

Educational theory has tended to focus on the global North but the global South in recent decades have been marked by what some call a ‘revolution in mass education’ (Bledsoe et al., 1999).

Writing on India Jeffrey et al. (2008) have shown how high rates of unemployment mean that efforts to attain educational qualifications often led not to jobs but ‘degrees without freedom’ (see also Jeffrey, 2010). Others have pointed to the strong impetus for children to travel internationally to gain more prestigious qualifications, for instance from Hong Kong to Canada (Waters, 2006). When considered from the perspective of the global South, therefore, the basic Bourdieuan point that mass education intensifies competition for schools holds up well; the primary difference is the high stakes attached to ‘failure’—chronic unemployment—and the role that colonialism played in unevenly structuring educational opportunities.

It should be noted that Bourdieu’s work, drawn on here, is widely discussed and disputed, and I am using his concepts to make some brief schematic points about the reasons for and shape of school children’s movement in South Africa. Bourdieu has argued that ‘cultural capital’ is ‘predisposed to function as symbolic capital’ and I use the latter term here since it better emphasizes contestations over what counts as ‘legitimate’ or ‘prestigious’ culture in society—for instance what language skills are recognized in the labor market (see Bourdieu, 1985: 18). This emphasis on contested hierarchies of prestige is important in a country whose modern institutions were established or transformed only 20 years ago when democracy was won by the black majority (for further discussions on symbolic power and cultural capital see Bourdieu, 2013; for a recent application of Bourdieu in South Africa see Burawoy and Von Holdt, 2012).

2.2. The politics of schooling choice in South Africa

Over the last 20 years a series of education reforms ‘sweeping the globe’ have propelled ‘schooling choice’ policies that emphasize the positive virtues of a market in education (Plank and Sykes, 2003: vii). The basic idea of these reforms is that parents should choose the school their child attends and not, therefore, be bound by ‘zoning’ (see Andre-Bechely, 2007; Ball et al., 1995; Butler and Hamnett, 2007; Butler and Robson, 2003; Butler and van Zanten, 2007; Lipman, 2011; Ravitch, 2010; Reay, 2008). While advocates argue that schools competing for students and parents acting like customers will improve the educational system, many of the empirical studies find that middle class parents are better able than working-class parents to take advantage of parental schooling choice (Ball et al., 1995; Lipman, 2011; Ravitch, 2010; Reay, 2008).

As Woolman and Fleisch (2006) note, however, the move toward schooling choice in South Africa—that is children not attending their local school—was an ‘unintended experiment’ that arose from late apartheid and post-apartheid reforms. Under pressure to cut public spending and wishing to reform apartheid incrementally, in the early 1990s the flailing apartheid government encouraged white schools to introduce fees and become more autonomous. The ANC-led government, elected in 1994, continued the general thrust of late-apartheid reforms but added a rights-based and redistributive agenda. Key changes included laws mandating that no child could be excluded from his or her school (once admitted) for financial reasons and that greater funds would be given to the poorest schools. From 2007 the poorest schools received extra funding so that they would not have to charge fees—now 60% of schools charge no fees (for overviews, see Bray et al., 2010; Chisholm, 2004; Lemon, 1994). However, the significant role of fees, which allow schools to employ extra (‘governing body’) teachers and improve facilities, creates a strong incentive for schools to admit certain students and exclude others. Indeed, the considerable autonomy schools in South Africa have over admissions and fees, a prominent theme in this paper, demonstrates that schools’ strategies must be taken seriously if we are

² Whereas Bourdieu published a volume on language and symbolic power (Bourdieu, 1991), as Ives (2004) points out Gramsci trained as a linguist, and ‘prestige’ and ‘hegemony’ were closely associated concepts in his early intellectual and political development.

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