

## **COLONIAL PALIMPSESTS<sup>1</sup> IN SCHOOLING: TRACING CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN SOUTH AFRICA**

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**ABSTRACT** Using the image of a palimpsest, this paper illustrates how patterns laid down in the colonial past linger on after colonial governments are dismantled, in this case in South Africa. As in a palimpsest, historical patterns are partially but unevenly erased as new forms are inscribed on the template when governments change. Arguing that palimpsests need to be analysed in context, the paper looks at three periods: settler colonialism up to 1910 when the major script of colonial schooling was written; the period of apartheid (1948-1994) when the initial colonial script was modified to intensify inequalities; and the post-1994 period, when fundamental changes to the colonial script were envisaged, but the deeply etched inequalities of the past have endured, albeit in different configurations. With theorists of coloniality, the paper suggests that more radical changes are needed to shift historically embedded inequalities of class, race, gender, locality, culture, language and identity associated with colonialism. The palimpsest of schooling would then require further erasures and rewriting to reflect greater social justice.

**KEYWORDS:** Settler colonialism, Apartheid, Privilege, Historical redress, Palimpsest, Social justice

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<sup>1</sup> Palimpsest: a manuscript or piece of writing material on which later writing has been superimposed on effaced earlier writing. It is something reused or altered but still bearing visible traces of its earlier form. (Oxford Languages, 2021)

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In 1994, South Africa held its first democratic elections, signalling not only an end to apartheid but also an end to the colonisation of Africa. In a highly symbolic ceremony, Nelson Mandela was inaugurated as state president at South Africa's seat of administrative government, Pretoria's magisterial Union Buildings. These imposing buildings, designed with two wings around a central colonnade and amphitheatre, represented the coming together of Boer and British polities into the Union of South Africa in 1910, following Boer defeat in the Anglo Boer War.<sup>3</sup> As the seat of government of a British dominion, the buildings symbolised a settlement between colonising groups that specifically excluded the colonised African majority. In 1948, when the Afrikaner Nationalist Party won electoral power, the buildings became the seat of apartheid government and another variant of colonialism was introduced which denied the possibility of common citizenship to African people, instead allocating them to ethnically defined 'homelands'. The inauguration of President Mandela at the Union Buildings provided a vivid symbol of the shift of governmental power. In the presence of global and local dignitaries as well as a massive crowd filling the terraced gardens, Mandela took the oath of office to usher in the new democratic order of equal rights and citizenship. Fighter jets – previously part of apartheid's military force – flew in formation across the sky, displaying the colours of the country's new flag. The southernmost country of Africa was finally free, and the era of colonisation had come to an end. Or had it?

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<sup>3</sup> The Union Buildings were designed by a prominent English architect, who also designed government buildings in India and Kenya. They are a powerful symbol of government as well as British imperialism. South Africa has three capitals: Cape Town is the legislative capital where the historical houses of parliament are located; Pretoria is the administrative capital where the civil service is headquartered in the Union Buildings; and Bloemfontein is the judicial capital where higher courts are located.

Each of the moments mentioned above, with successive governments occupying the symbolic seat of power, points to significant shifts in colonial arrangements. However, as theorists of coloniality argue, the power relations established by colonialism endure well beyond the dismantling of colonial administrations (see eg Mignolo 2007, 2011; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013). In the words of Maldonado Torres (2007: 243):

Coloniality... refers to long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism, but that define culture, labor, intersubjective relations, and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administrations. Thus, coloniality survives colonialism. ... In a way, as modern subjects we breathe coloniality all the time and every day.

South Africa is no exception to this. From the perspective of coloniality theory, it could be argued that historical inequalities of class, race, gender, locality, culture, language and identity have so saturated South Africa's social fabric that changes in government after 1994 have not had much impact on them. This is strongly evident in schooling, where post-apartheid policy changes have not been able to shift the embedded and persistent inequalities stemming from apartheid and colonial segregation before then. Historical inequalities are still evident, lingering on into the present, albeit in somewhat altered forms.

In this article, I use the image of a palimpsest to illustrate how patterns laid down in the colonial past are still evident, in this case in South Africa. As in a palimpsest, historical patterns are partially but unevenly erased as new forms are inscribed on the template of schooling when governments change. New arrangements cannot easily overwrite what has been there before, simply

to replace the past with a new script. Earlier inscriptions, expressing historical cultural interests and powerplays, emerge alongside new inscriptions, often in incomplete or somewhat altered forms that obscure or confound later designs. However certain these scripts for change may seem, the palimpsest is never clear of its past.

Of course, schooling policy palimpsests do not write themselves, nor are they written by invisible hands. They are written by those with authority to allocate values (to use a classic policy definition) and are themselves enfolded into the intersectional power relations and social configurations of places and times, particularly as policies are implemented in local conditions, not always as envisaged. Palimpsests may be better understood as representations of desired arrangements, and certainly should not be regarded as causative in themselves. Inscriptions tell a story that is partial rather than definitive, and they cannot be regarded as accurate historical records. That said, palimpsests do illustrate the lingering of past inscriptions, indicating that policies seldom begin on a clean slate.

In this paper, I argue that the historical processes of European colonisation put Western forms of schooling in place in colonies and these provide the template on which locally specific policies were inscribed. The original template remains visible in post colonies, albeit with local variants, as part of the lingering power relations of coloniality. I illustrate these points through the example of schooling in South Africa, showing the shifting inscriptions of schooling policy in relation to significant historical power shifts. Rather than attempting a comprehensive narrative, this paper is structured around the three moments mentioned in the introduction. First, I look at the period of settler colonialism up to 1910, where the major script of colonial schooling was written. Second,

I turn to the period of apartheid to show how the initial colonial script was modified to intensify inequalities. Finally, I address the post-1994 period, where fundamental changes to the colonial script were envisaged, but persistent inequalities remain that reflect past patterns albeit in different forms. These three moments are presented as snapshots that illustrate the past in the present, rather than being definitive explanations.

Such a broad-ranging account cannot possibly do justice to significant debates on schooling policy and social change, and runs the danger of providing an apparently coherent narrative of what is more accurately understood as a complex and contested history. With these provisos, the following section of the paper shows what I take to be the main inscriptions of settler colonialism and its schooling that are still visible, even as they were later magnified by apartheid, and later still partially erased and overwritten by post-apartheid restructuring.

### **(1) Settler colonialism and schooling (1652-1910)**

South Africa was colonised by two different European powers, both of whom contributed to the warp and weft of its particular forms of colonialism. White settlement began with a trading station established by the Dutch East India Company in 1652 on the shipping route to the east. A small community grew around Cape Town, supplemented over time by settlers from Europe, including France and Germany, with slave labour imported from the East Indies and elsewhere in Africa. Indigenous Khoe and San groups living in the area were largely decimated and displaced. Remnant people were absorbed into the Cape underclass that also included freed slaves and a small Muslim

community, later identified as 'Coloured'.<sup>4</sup> In 1806, in the context of the Napoleonic wars, Britain took over the Cape as a colony because of its strategic value. The British developed a substantial colonial administration and increasingly integrated the Cape into the capitalist world economy of the time (Legassick and Ross, 2012). Both heritages, Dutch and British, are evident in the social and schooling arrangements that were established as colonial settlement expanded.

During the 1800s, Dutch/Boer pastoralists (trekboers), dissatisfied with British control, moved in numbers into the interior, extending British imperial interests with them. Settler expansion brought violent contestation over land and resources as Boers came up against significant African polities (including Xhosa, Zulu, Sotho and Tswana). Over time and through various battles, skirmishes, and negotiations, Africans were dispossessed of their land, concentrated into reserve areas, and proletarianized. A second British colony (Natal) was established, as well as two fragile Boer republics (the Orange Free State and Transvaal), resulting in four governance structures for the two settler groups. (The boundaries of these are shown in Figure 2 below.) British Protectorates were established on the lands of the Tswana, Sotho and Swazi. Additional labour was imported: indentured Indian labourers for sugar cane plantations in Natal, and indentured Chinese labourers for mining on the Witwatersrand.

The discovery of minerals (diamonds and then gold) was decisive in the economic development of the country and entailed significant British investment. British interests in the Boer-held Transvaal goldfields were a major catalyst for the Anglo Boer War of 1899 to 1902, in

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<sup>4</sup> It is unfortunately not possible to talk of colonialism and apartheid in South Africa without reference to its racial classification system.

which the British prevailed. During this period, racial and gender hierarchies were hardened and different forms of labour control were put in place in coercive ways, well before apartheid further institutionalised these (see Hamilton, Mbenga, & Ross, 2012; Ross, Mager & Nasson, 2012).

It is important to note that settler penetration into the interior was uneven and often uncertain. Though white settlers succeeded in imposing brutal labour regimes, they did not destroy the cultural roots of African polities (Legassick & Ross, 2012). Colonial rule – whatever its forms – was always contested, with original occupants far from passive in their responses, and hegemony never stably attained by successive governments (see Christie 2020).

A significant feature of colonisation in this period was continuing tension between Dutch/Boer and British interests, as power shifted from one to the other. Dutch pastoralists moving into the interior developed a form of Boer identity that was increasingly distant from the settled areas around Cape Town, and Afrikaans developed as a language of its own, both in Cape Town and the interior. Afrikaner resentment towards British power was intensified by the Anglo Boer War which left a bitter legacy. When the Union of South Africa was formed in 1910, a priority for Britain was to unite the two settler groups (and their four separate governments) into a British dominion – as symbolised by the Union Buildings. The losers in this arrangement were the majority black population, who were excluded from civil law and instead placed under forms of customary law. Before this, the Cape had established a non-racial qualified franchise, but this was not extended under the Act of Union – an indication of British appeasement to the Boers, who were opposed to equality, at the expense of the black population. In

response, the African National Congress was formed in 1912, but protests were to no avail. The 1913 Land Act (adjusted in 1936) confirmed the division of land achieved by settler conquest, confining the land rights of the majority black population to reserve areas making up around 10% of the land.

The Land Act was an enormously significant step in formalising racial and spatial segregation as capitalism became entrenched and the economy developed in mining and manufacturing, heavily depended on cheap black labour power. Sol Plaatje's famous book, *Native Life in South Africa* (1916/2007), opens Chapter 1 with the following statement: 'Awakening on Friday morning, June 20, 1913, the South African native found himself, not actually a slave, but a pariah in the land of his birth' (p 20). In the period that followed, segregationist legislation further limited the job opportunities of black workers, reserved skilled labour positions for whites, extended an exploitative migrant labour system, and sought to curtail the freedom of movement and urbanisation of black people - all of this well before the apartheid period.

### *Schooling*

What, then, about schooling policy and provision under early settler colonialism? During this period, public schooling reflected the differing aspirations and worldviews of both sets of European settlers; and it did not include African people, (see Christie, 2020; Malherbe, 1925). For Dutch settlers, schooling fell under the pastoral aegis of the Dutch Reformed Church. Though schooling was sparse as settlers moved further into the interior, most Boers had exposure to at least basic literacy in Dutch, since this was required for confirmation in the church. British occupation of the Cape brought a different



governmental approach to schooling: a nondenominational public system with English as medium of instruction and state subsidies for schools established on a voluntary basis by local communities. While more 'elite' Dutch settlers in the Western Cape participated in this system of public schooling, those in the interior were not satisfied with its non-denominational and anglicised orientation, pressing instead for Dutch/Afrikaans medium and closer links to the church.

Tensions around schooling did not abate. When 'uitlanders' moved into the Transvaal goldfields, English-speakers who resisted instruction in Dutch opened their own schools. After defeating the Boers in the war of 1899-1902, the British administration attempted to anglicise schooling, in response to which Boer groups set up their own schools espousing Christian National Education and Dutch/Afrikaans language of instruction. Agreement was soon reached that both languages would be used in public schools, and in the Act of Union, both were recognised as official languages. Schooling was placed under provincial authority, and in the following years, free and compulsory education for whites was extended to secondary level.

By contrast, throughout this period, there was no systematic provision of schooling for indigenous African people. The only schooling available was that provided by the different missionary societies, who were very active in South Africa (Chisholm, 2017; Elphic, 2012; Etherington, 2005). For the most part mission schools provided very elementary, gendered and Biblically-oriented teaching to those who had access to them, including white children. A small handful of mission schools such as Lovedale and Healdtown in the Eastern Cape were notable places of excellence, aiming to educate an elite in institutions that were comparable to schools in Britain. There can be no doubt that missionaries were integral to westernisation

and cultural destabilisation as part of colonial processes. However, one of the contradictions of mission education is that most the leaders of the anti-apartheid struggle attended mission schools, including Nelson Mandela, Oliver Tambo, and the women's rights activist Ellen Kuzwayo.

To sum up: In this period of initial colonisation, the basic script for divided and unequal schooling was laid down in South Africa, with both racial and ethnic differences deeply inscribed on the founding palimpsest. Public schools for white settlers were state-aided or state provided, they were segregated by race, and they accommodated both languages that had been points of friction between Boer and British settlers. The seeds of Christian National Education were sown in Boer resistance to anglicisation, to be revived as an expression of Afrikaner nationalism under apartheid. The majority indigenous Africans were not included in the system of public schooling that was reserved for whites, and missionaries were ill-equipped to cope with expanding numbers – a situation that endured until it was addressed by the apartheid government. As I shall show, these features of colonial schooling were not completely overwritten or erased by subsequent changes of government, and their imprint is still visible in schooling provision.

## **(2) Apartheid and schooling (1948-1994)**

Fast forward to 1948 and the introduction of apartheid after the electoral victory of the National Party. At the Union Buildings, in a sealed room buried in the interior with maps of the country covering its walls, the apartheid government planned its 'total strategy' onslaught against opposition to its rule. It lies beyond the scope of this paper

to explore the social and economic changes that provided the background to the ascendancy of Afrikaner nationalism and the framework of discriminatory legislation that made up apartheid. Suffice it to say that apartheid laws, notorious for their racial brutality, were forged on the basis of existing inequalities which they refined and extended. While race was foregrounded in apartheid ideology, apartheid was actually a form of racial capitalism, based on the ultra-exploitation of cheap black labour power and the control of the majority black population.

Among other measures, apartheid legislation classified people by race, outlawed racial mixing, and segregated all facilities along racial lines. Labour controls on black workers were tightened, the discriminatory labour regime was further entrenched, and existing restrictions on the movement of black people were extended. Former reserves were turned into separate ethnically-defined 'homelands' or Bantustans with their own administrations, and Africans were denied citizenship of a shared South Africa. Through this combination of measures, more than three and a half million people were forcibly relocated from towns and white designated areas. Estimates are that about 44% of the country's population (17 million people) were living in Bantustans by 1990, with about 800 traditional leaders given financial support by the South African government (Oomen, 2005).

While there is no doubt that apartheid was the apogee of centuries of violent conquest, the nature of its colonial form has been much debated. As discussed in Christie (2020), the apartheid state has been variously theorised as 'internal colonialism', 'colonialism of a special type', 'settler colonialism' and so on. Beyond analytical differences, these terms point to differences in political struggle at particular moments (see Evans, 2012; Everatt,

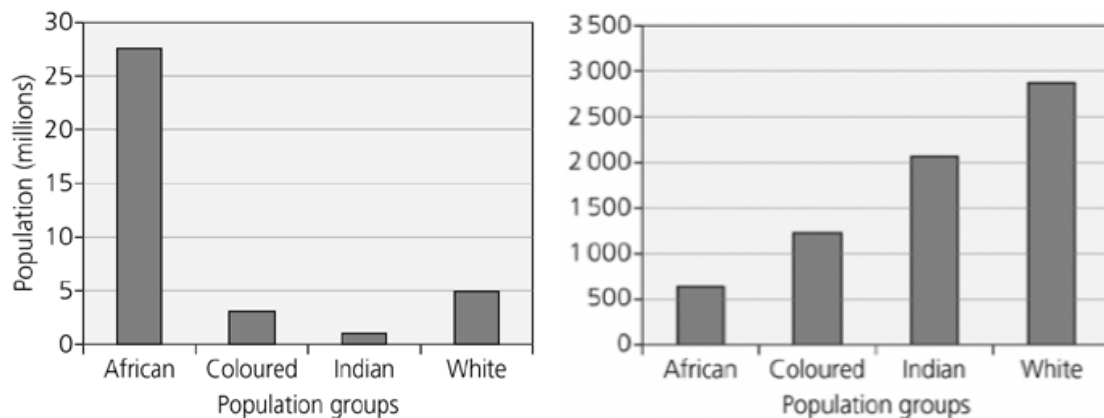
1992; Hopkins, 2008; Mamdani, 1996; Saunders, 2000). Also to be considered is the colonial nature of the Bantustans, constructed as a form of indirect rule that mimicked colonialism in Africa. Bantustans were administered by government-paid chiefs and officials and were steered towards forms of self-government. Separate administrations, state services and infrastructure were established, including separate departments of education for each Bantustan. Between 1976 and 1981, four of the ten Bantustans were granted 'independent' status by the South African government (though they were not internationally recognised) – a complex variant of 'decolonisation' at the time when much of Africa was being decolonised.

In 1961, the apartheid government declared a Republic and South Africa left the British Commonwealth – with British economic interests remaining in place.

### *Schooling*

Across the country, the impact of apartheid education was profound. Much has been written about this and it is not possible to do justice here to the extensive and detailed debates (for overviews, see Chisholm, 2017; Kallaway, 1984). Instead, what I present here are visible continuities and erasures on the policy palimpsest. Through legislation, the apartheid government separated racially classified groups (European/white, Indian, Coloured, African) into different departments of education, with inequalities structured into every aspect of provisioning: inequalities in funding, facilities, teacher education qualifications, and so on. Figure 1 illustrates the distorted allocation of funding, with the majority African population having the lowest expenditure per child, and the minority white population the highest.

## Population 1989. Expenditure on schooling (in Rand)



**Figure 1: Education expenditure on different population groups, 1989, illustrating the distorted allocation of funding**

The Bantu Education Act of 1954 systematised schooling for Africans for the first time. Missionary involvement was halted and almost all mission schools, except for Catholic schools, were closed. In their place, a system of state schooling was introduced, with the explicit aim of linking schooling to different cultural identities as well as to the labour needs of the economy. While Bantu Education is justifiably excoriated for its unequal and inferior education and its cementing of racism in schooling, it is worth recognising that the system of mission schooling that it replaced was inadequate to its task, and missionaries themselves were pressing for change. Bantu Education was apartheid's response to the economic and social changes of the times, providing a distorted version of 'cultural recognition' (which was fashionable in anthropology at the time) to limit the schooling offered to black people and restrict their labour market participation to low-income and low-status jobs. While it is true that schooling provision for Africans expanded and secondary education grew under apartheid, its inferior quality became increasingly intolerable, leading directly to the student protests of the 1970s and 1980s that contributed to apartheid's undoing.

African schooling in 'white' parts of South Africa fell under the racially separate Department of Education and Training, whereas in Bantustans, schooling fell under Bantustan administrations. Very little research exists on Bantustan education, beyond the overall shape and size of provision (see Jacklin and Graaff, 1992). What research there is shows that schools in Bantustans were less well provisioned than their urban Bantu Education counterparts. Previously, these rural communities had mostly fallen outside of areas where public schooling had been established and were served (or underserved) by mission schooling. With minimal schooling provision before apartheid, these areas continued to be relatively disadvantaged under Bantustan administration – though it needs to be recognised that Bantustan infrastructure provided schools where there had been none before. Bantustan education etched the pattern of under-provision in rural schooling even more deeply on the palimpsest of schooling.

With regard to schooling for people classified as European/white, the picture was quite different. In this case, apartheid arrangements reflected another iteration of the long-standing tension, if not enmity, between language groups. The National Education Policy Act of 1967 articulated an Afrikaner nationalist vision for public schooling. The Act stipulated the separation of English or Afrikaans as languages of instruction in white schools and stated that single medium schools would be preferable to dual medium or bilingual schools.<sup>5</sup> And it stipulated that white schooling would be run on a Christian and National basis, with both terms defined. It stated that in 'imprinting' a 'broad national character', education should 'inculcate a spirit of patriotism, founded on loyalty and

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<sup>5</sup> Both English and Afrikaans would be taught in all white schools, but the apartheid government wanted to ensure that Afrikaans language and culture would be preserved from English influence by separating schools.

responsibility towards the fatherland, its soil and its natural resources', and it should 'achieve a sense of unity and a spirit of co-operation'. In an exemplary instance of apartheid double speak, references to the 'fatherland' and to 'national unity' applied only to the white minority population. As EG Malherbe observes, the spirit of the 1967 Act was 'reminiscent of the chauvinistic regulations and *richlinien* issued under the early Nazi regime' (1975:148).

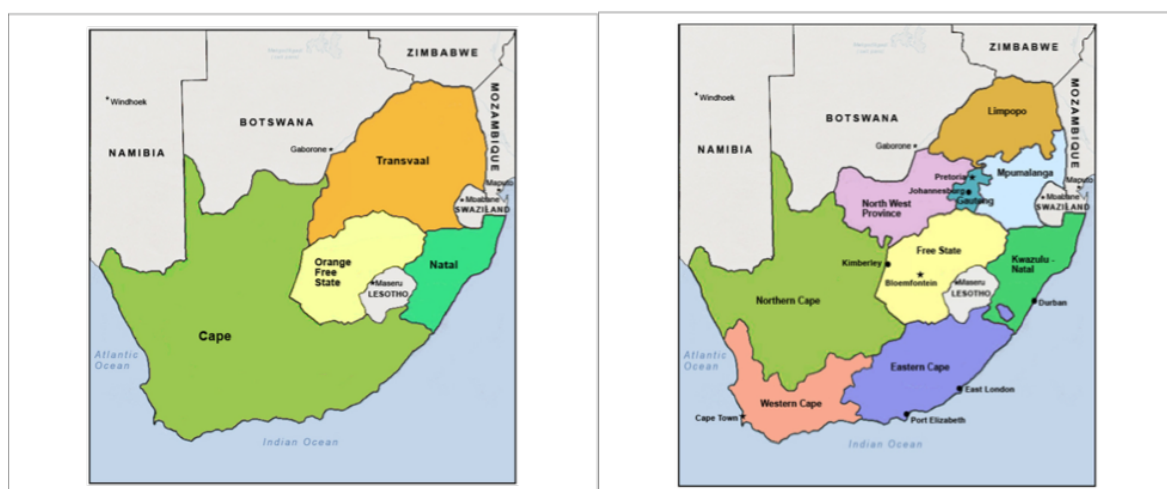
In short, apartheid's governance arrangements for schooling extended and deepened existing inequalities. They formalised racial segregation and strengthened ethnic identities, privileging the white population in every dimension of schooling. The 1967 Act expressed the determination of Afrikaner nationalists that their language and culture should be nurtured in public schools – a legacy that is visible in post-apartheid schooling arrangements as well, as the next section will show. It is of course understandable that the education offered to whites was seen as hegemonically desirable in the racialised and unequal dispensation of apartheid education. It is nonetheless ironic that this flawed system – with such an overt ideological bias – should be assumed to be of 'high standard' and serve as the model for post-apartheid education to aspire towards.

### **(3) Post-apartheid changes and schooling (1994-)**

Fast forward to 1994 and the inauguration of Nelson Mandela at the Union Buildings – a moment that would be decisive in ending the logics of colonialism and building an alternative. Much heralded as this moment was, it is important to recognise that it did not signify the 'overthrow of the state'. It was the product of a tough negotiated settlement between erstwhile enemies (the apartheid government and its opponents) that had begun in 1990

with the unbanning of political organisations and the release of Mandela. Negotiations brought a compromise 'government of national unity', led by the ANC and its alliance partners and including the National Party and other minor parties. It was this context of political compromise that ended the formalities of colonialism, but in ways that enabled deep structural inequalities of coloniality to linger on, albeit often in new forms.

A constitutional democracy and rights-based equal citizenship were hallmarks of the new South Africa. Constitutional democracy meant that the repeal of apartheid laws would take place through parliamentary procedures, and the rule of law would prevail. As part of the compromise negotiations, nine new provinces were demarcated from the previous four provinces, and Bantustans were incorporated into provinces (see Figure 2). Existing apartheid legislation was amended as necessary; new laws were passed; and government departments were restructured. 'Sunset clauses' in the constitutional settlement protected the positions of key apartheid bureaucrats for five years, which meant that the new bureaucracy would be a mix of experienced staff (often able to block change) and new political appointees (often lacking in experience).





**Figure 2: Old and new provincial boundaries, showing adjustments made as part of constitutional negotiations.**

A contradiction within this settlement was that the major political changes were not accompanied by economic changes of similar magnitude. Little was done to shift the patterns of economic ownership, though social grants were introduced to alleviate extreme poverty. With neoliberalism in global ascendancy, South Africa soon moved in that direction. The early policy of the Reconstruction and Development Programme ('growth through redistribution') was replaced by a clearly neoliberal framework, ironically known as the Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) strategy. This signalled that market logics would prevail over possibilities for more radical changes to ownership and redistribution. At time of writing (2021),

South Africa is haunted by continuing problems of high poverty, high inequality and high unemployment (Alvaredo et al. 2018; Branson, Garlick, Lam & Leibbrandt, 2012). Official figures show an unemployment rate of 36.2% in June 2021, with youth unemployment at 63.6%. The templates of apartheid and earlier colonialism are still evident in the social structures of the economy as well as in multiple practices of daily life.

Another contradiction in the post-apartheid settlement relates to Bantustans. Though these were formally dissolved, the 1996 constitution nevertheless made provision for traditional leaders and customary law to operate. This has meant that the structures of indirect rule under colonialism and apartheid still hold valence, alongside common law – an ambiguous position that restricts the land ownership and citizenship rights of rural people living in former Bantustans. Claassens (2014: 761) argues that 'these laws and policies reinforce, rather than address, the legacy of the 1913 and 1936 Land Acts'.

## *Schooling*

What, then, of post-apartheid changes to the palimpsest of schooling policy? Education reform was a priority for both sides in the period of political transition (1990 to 1996) and their different priorities are evident in their approach to the task. For the ANC and its allies, a major concern was the youth protests against Bantu Education that had started in Soweto 1976 were continuing to disrupt schooling across the country. Students had joined with broader mass movements for social change aiming to make the apartheid system ungovernable and black schooling was barely functional. Calls for 'People's Education for People's Power' signalled high expectations for change from the side of the mass democratic movement, and the assumption that the new system would bring a better dispensation for all.

For its part, the National Party (NP) had other concerns. In a canny move in 1990, the NP government took important steps to protect white schools and keep them separate in the face of inevitable changes. It made provision for the management committees of white schools to admit limited numbers of black students under strict conditions, and in effect turned them into state-aided schools. Early in the negotiation process, the NP secured an agreement that that these schools could not be changed without bona fide negotiations with their governing bodies. And at the last minute before the deadline for negotiations to end in 1996, the NP won a significant concession against the wishes of the ANC – that the constitution would allow state-aided public schools to be single-medium (ie Afrikaans-only). The NP was determined to hold onto the Afrikaans language rights that it had secured in the early days of settler colonisation and

further developed under apartheid – surely one of the strongest continuities on the policy palimpsest.

Under South Africa's new constitution, the product of much negotiation, education was affirmed as a basic human right, to be free and progressively available to all. Equal citizenship meant that the values of justice, equity and non-discrimination would underpin new policies, and that the eleven official languages of the country would be recognised. On this basis, the stated task of the new government – with its different interests – was to develop a suite of policies to bring together the divided system of the past and provide education of equal quality for all in a single non-racial system. This meant placing an entirely new script on the policy palimpsest, and to give substance to this in ways that would break with the colonial past.

The first step was to change administrative arrangements, dissolving the plethora of separate education departments and putting in place a national department and provincial departments in each of the nine newly established provinces. The National Education Policy Act (NEPA) of 1996 brought an administrative end to apartheid's racial and ethnic divisions and identities. The next step was to change the arrangements for school governance and funding through the South African Schools Act (SASA) of 1996. And later, a new curriculum model was put in place and revised several times.

The provisions of SASA were crucial in setting the possibilities and limits to fundamental change. For governance, SASA devolved significant powers to school governing bodies (SGBs), giving them responsibility for a range of policies including admissions and language of instruction, within the bounds of the country's constitution. School-based management had the support of both politically competing groups, but for very different

reasons. From the side of the ANC and its allies, SGBs were seen as a form of democratic participation and a way to restore legitimacy to schools that had been disrupted by protests. For conservative white groups, SGBs were seen as a way of ensuring that established white interests would prevail in the historically privileged schools that had been given special consideration in constitutional negotiations. And indeed, the powers given to SGBs have served to affirm if not deepen inequality. SASA gave schools the status of juristic persons, and over the years, there have been a number of court cases between schools and education departments over issues such as admissions, appointment of teachers and principals, language policies and so on – arguably an unanticipated consequence for the ANC-led government.

The funding of schools presented a major conundrum of its own. Apartheid's distorted funding arrangements meant that schooling for the minority white population was funded at a much higher level than schooling for the majority, and correcting this distortion presented difficult funding challenges. A strategic decision was taken, and enshrined in SASA, that public schools would be allowed to charge fees to supplement state allocations. The justification for this was that fees would increase the resource base for schools, while encouraging middle class (white) parents to remain within the public system. As a measure to recognise that redress was necessary, schools were divided into quintiles from poorest (quintile 1) to least poor (quintile 5), and a small budgetary amount was set aside for allocation on an equity basis. However, this funding was too meagre to make much difference to the historically poorest schools, and over time, schools in quintiles 1, 2, 3 and some in quintile 4 were declared 'fee free' in recognition that communities were too poor to pay – but no additional state funding was provided beyond the quintile formula. At the same time, public schools in upper

quintiles were able to charge fees sufficiently high to double their staffing and broaden their curriculum offerings.

In effect, arrangements for governance and funding enacted in SASA introduced market principles into the state system. Marketisation brought social class more powerfully into play without eliminating racial privilege, and highlighted rather than reduced inequalities in schooling. The new funding arrangements were not adequate to the task of repairing historical inequalities, let alone building a new system of equal quality.

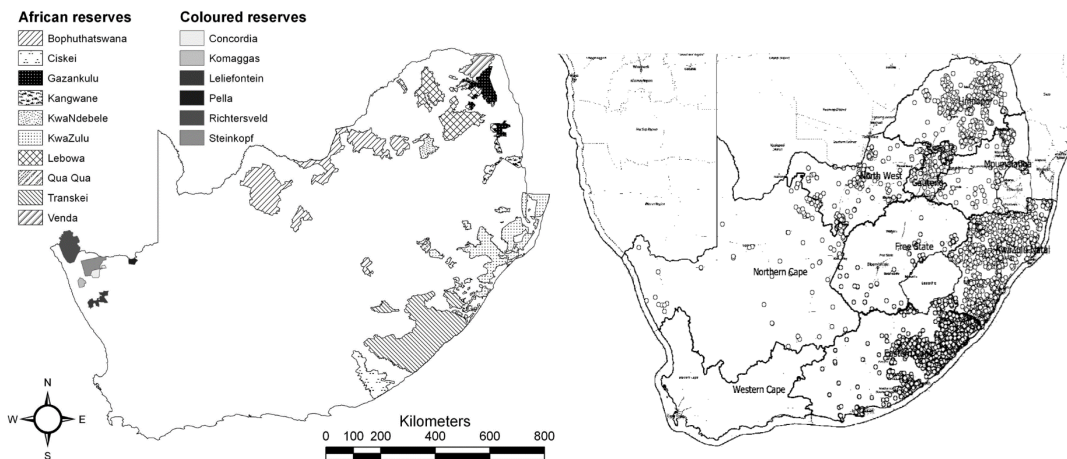
Under the new arrangements, former Bantustan schools were placed under the purview of provinces. The large rural provinces which incorporated former Bantustans have concentrations of historically disadvantaged schools, almost all of which are now fee-free. The provisioning and performance of these schools relative to their privileged counterparts has remained fundamentally unequal over the years. As van der Berg (2015) points out, poverty, politics and rurality have combined to produce schooling that fails the majority of students. The inequalities of the past remain all too visible on the palimpsest, despite attempts to over-write them.

In addition to governance and funding, matters of language and culture have been particularly difficult to address. Given apartheid's construction of essentialised identities of race/ language/ culture as the basis for separate and unequal treatment of people, it has been particularly difficult to justify any form of differentiation in post-apartheid schooling. Curriculum revisions over the years have settled on a form of content that endorses the 'powerful knowledge' of a particular modernist episteme – an approach that does not consider the very different learning conditions in legacy apartheid schools. In

particular, the curriculum does not recognise the linguistic diversity of the population, or the significance of local knowledge. Even although eleven official languages are constitutionally recognised, only two of these are supported as languages of instruction after Grade 4 – English and Afrikaans – and the learning of African languages is not compulsory. This is in spite of the fact that the majority of the country's schools are black schools where African languages are spoken. The effect of this is a structural discrimination, disadvantaging children who speak languages other than English and Afrikaans and casting their language capabilities and cultural knowledges in deficit terms (see McKinney, 2017).

In overall terms, the inequalities in the South African schooling system indicate that the power dynamics of colonialism have not substantially shifted. There is general agreement that the education system as a whole performs very badly, with South Africa ranked among the worst performers on all international comparative scales (Mlachila and Moeletsi, 2019). Moreover, there are distinctively different patterns of performance for students attending different schools, with results varying according to poverty quintiles and former apartheid departments of schools. The results are consistently 'bimodal', with nearly 80% of students attending the poorly functioning part of the system, and a small minority (8%) attending the fee-paying schools (mostly desegregated) that achieve good results (Christie, 2020). Almost all of the poorly performing schools are black schools in townships and rural areas (including former Bantustans).

Figure 3 illustrates the continuing legacy of inequalities, where the first map shows the location of Bantustans under apartheid, and the second map shows the distribution of schools without running water in 2020. The overlap is striking.



**Figure 3: Distribution of Bantustans compared with distribution of schools without running water, 2020**

### **Conclusion: colonialism, continuity and change?**

The image of a palimpsest, with its multilayered inscriptions, partial erasures, and superimpositions, provides a means of illustrating shifts and continuities in arrangements for schooling over time. As cautioned at the beginning of this paper, palimpsests cannot be read as definitive records, and they cannot provide explanations of what they make visible. They are representations of the shifting power relations and competing interests that produce them. When analysed more fully in their contexts, they show, in the case of South Africa, that the deep etchings of the entangled colonial past in its different phases have been difficult to erase, even as attempts are made to do so.

In looking at three moments of significant change in government in South Africa, it is interesting to see the shifts in schooling arrangements. Changes in government have had significant effects – but as I have shown, the patterns established under early settler colonialism were modified and deepened under apartheid's particular colonial arrangements, and still have effects on the schooling dispensation of South Africa as a post colony. While it would be incorrect to assume that colonial

arrangements have remained basically unchanged, their forms and effects can still be traced as expressions of political interests and power relations. There are two obvious examples of historical continuities in the post-apartheid schooling dispensation. The first is the continuing privileged status of former white schools. A legacy of earlier colonisation, the privileged status of white schools was solidified by apartheid racial discrimination, and protected through steps taken by the National Party government when apartheid was ending and in the subsequent constitutional negotiations. In effect, National Party insistence on maintaining Afrikaans language and culture in schooling meant that *all* former white schools (whether Afrikaans medium or not) were able to moderate the pace of change. The status given to these schools (now referred to colloquially as 'former Model C schools') was consolidated by the considerable powers devolved to school governing bodies in the new policy arrangements. The second major example of continuity is the under-provisioning of schooling for black people in townships and particularly in rural areas. In this case, it is possible to trace continuities between the initial insufficiencies of mission schooling, through the discriminatory policies of Bantu education and the Bantustans, to current funding arrangements which do not make adequate provision for historical redress.

Returning, then, to the question posed at the end of the opening paragraph of this paper: did the liberation of South Africa bring an end to colonisation? In strictly governmental terms, it clearly did. Yet, a brief look at schooling in South Africa shows that the answer to this question is not simple. As I have illustrated, the deeply etched inscriptions of colonial schooling have endured, albeit in altered configurations.



In overall terms, it needs to be acknowledged that the negotiated settlement to end colonialism was limited in its achievements. In spite of major political changes, the structure of the economy remained largely unchanged. Mahmood Mamdani (2020) observes that 'the concessions made to whites during the negotiations to end apartheid ... ensure that the problem of social justice will not be solved any time soon' (149). Nevertheless, he argues, 'even a partial rebirth is something'. He sets out the major achievement of negotiations as follows: 'The response to political violence in South Africa ... was a reframing of political identity so that formerly opposed identities could live together in the new political community. This is the heart of decolonising the political' (195). And certainly, it is important not to under-estimate the significance of this achievement.

Yet, as theorists of coloniality point out, 'decolonising the political' is not in itself sufficient to shift the inequalities that linger on after a long history of colonialization. In South Africa, the palimpsest of schooling shows the limits of what has been achieved so far. It indicates that more radical changes are needed to shift the historically embedded inequalities of class, race, gender, locality, culture, language and identity – inequalities that the schooling system is folded into. Fundamental changes – to be represented by further erasures and inscriptions on the palimpsest of schooling – are essential if greater social justice is to be achieved.

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