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THE LIMITS OF REDISTRIBUTIVE SCHOOL FINANCE POLICY IN SOUTH AFRICA

RACHEL HATCH, ELIZABETH BUCKNER, AND CARINA OMOEVA

ABSTRACT

Since the end of apartheid, South Africa has embarked on extensive reforms aimed at promoting social cohesion, including progressive educational finance policy (e.g., the no-fee school policy) intended to redress historical inequalities. Because improving equality in and through education is vital to social cohesion, this case study examines whether the no-fee school policy has equalized—or is perceived to have equalized—school resources and educational opportunities in basic education. Using a mixed-methods approach that draws on household and school survey data and in-depth interviews, we find that the no-fee school policy has reduced the financial burden on black South Africans but that wide gaps in school resources remain. Moreover, we find that the concentration of black students in schools in the poorest areas and of white students in schools in the wealthiest areas rose between 2003 and 2013, and that some black South Africans are dissatisfied with their poor access to elite schools and the superior educational opportunities they offer. Our study argues that South Africa’s current school finance policies may be better characterized as pro-poor than redistributive, and points to implications for social cohesion.

INTRODUCTION

During apartheid, South Africa institutionalized race-based inequalities throughout society, including in its education system. Due to the highly unequal and exclusionary structures and practices of apartheid, strengthening social cohesion in the South African context required addressing past inequities. In the post-apartheid transition to democracy, the government’s broader efforts have

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taken the form of specific policies to provide redress and redistribution. The education system has been a key channel for these efforts, and the government has sought to transform a deeply divided and unequal education system into an equitable one. As such, South Africa makes an excellent case for exploring how educational policy targeting inequality plays into a broader peace and reconciliation process.

Specifically, this study centers on how changes to the no-fee school policy instituted after 2010 have shaped the policy's implementation and, ultimately, its contributions to equity. We argue that the policy may be better characterized as pro-poor than redistributive. The no-fee school policy has reduced the financial burden on many black households, which are often in poorer communities, but the ability of schools in wealthier areas to strengthen their budgets through higher school fees and other strategies has meant that inequalities in school resources remain. It appears that, because racial inequalities in South Africa overlap with socioeconomic, linguistic, and geographic divisions, the ability of redistributive educational policies to effect equity continues to be limited.

EDUCATION AND SOCIAL COHESION

Social cohesion can be understood as “the quality of coexistence between the multiple groups that operate within a society” (UNICEF 2016, para. 3). Stewart (2014) proposes that social cohesion is a product of three components: (a) low levels of inequality and marginalization; (b) stable, positive social bonds; and (c) an inclusive national identity. Berger-Schmitt (2002) conceptualizes only two dimensions: (a) low levels of inequality; and (b) social capital, which refers to durable, positive interactions and relationships across societies.

In conflict and postconflict contexts that have been built on highly unequal and exclusionary policies, redistribution is necessary to effectively lower levels of inequality (Fraser 2005; Novelli 2016; Novelli, Lopes Cardozo, and Smith 2015). Through redistribution, fraught societies equalize resources and opportunities and counteract legacies of oppression and inequity. Inequality plays a central role in these frameworks because improving social cohesion requires addressing the sources of conflict, and mounting evidence points to inequality as a common root cause (Alesina and Perotti 1996; Bartusevičius 2014). Inequality is theorized to be a powerful driver of conflict, particularly where inequalities fall along racial, ethnic, or religious group lines (often termed “horizontal” inequality). This is because inequality may fuel grievances, which provide a motive, while group

dynamics may facilitate mobilization for conflict (Brinkman, Attree, and Hezir 2013; Stewart 2000).

It is worth distinguishing between equality, where all groups are treated equally regardless of their differing circumstances, and equity, which recognizes that unequal treatment is often necessary in the pursuit of justice. In this article, we use the words “equality” or “inequality” to refer to objective differences in groups’ access to school or educational funding. In contrast, we use the words “equity” and “inequity” to refer to policies of unequal treatment, which either advance social justice or discriminate against certain groups, respectively.

While economic, political, social, and cultural inequalities can all spark conflict (Stewart 2008), education warrants critical attention as a force that shapes inequality and violence—and equality and social cohesion. First, inequalities in education are themselves problematic and an impediment to social cohesion (Novelli 2016). Second, inequalities in other domains arise through education because of links between education and employment opportunities, social standing, and political participation (Brown 2011; Novelli 2016). Empirical support for this argument is growing, and it now includes recent cross-national time series analyses showing that countries with higher levels of educational inequality across identity groups are more likely to experience conflict (Omoeva and Buckner 2015; Østby 2007, 2008).

On the other hand, this means that education systems also have the power to advance equity, not only in education but throughout society. For example, education policies may aim to improve educational outcomes—and, consequently, economic and social opportunity—for disadvantaged students through policies such as the elimination of school fees, improving the educational infrastructure, or ensuring that schools support the linguistic diversity of their students (Bush and Saltarelli 2000; Smith, McCandless, Paulson, and Wheaton 2011). In education finance, equality indicates equal funding for all students, while pro-equity policies are typically progressive in nature, which includes granting additional government funds to the neediest or historically marginalized populations. It is this potential for education to systematically reduce inequalities that led Novelli (2016) and Novelli, Lopes Cardozo, and Smith (2015) to argue that the redistribution of educational opportunities is one of the primary mechanisms for achieving greater equity.

In this study, we attend to the potential of redistributive education policy in South Africa to advance social cohesion by improving equity. We recognize that equity is necessary, but by itself is not a sufficient condition for social cohesion. We acknowledge further that equity-enhancing policies are not only essential to social cohesion but also politically sensitive. Even effective, well-intentioned policies may reignite grievances or violence if they are seen as unfairly privileging some over others, even where new benefits are meant to correct deep disadvantages (Brown 2011; Davies 2010). One example is affirmative action in education, which may increase educational opportunities for disadvantaged groups but also risks accentuating group divisions (Stewart, Brown, and Langer 2007). Such a policy may also be inflammatory when groups that are better off perceive it as unjust, which exemplifies the important point that perceived inequality can be more powerful than actual inequality (Stewart 2008). For this reason, our case study examines the relationship of South Africa's no-fee school policy to substantive shifts in inequality, and to perceptions of how equitable the policy is.

REDISTRIBUTIVE EDUCATIONAL POLICIES IN POST-APARTHEID SOUTH AFRICA

Apartheid in South Africa was an official policy of racial separation that lasted from 1948 to 1994. The Population Registration Act of 1950 classified individuals according to four racial categories—white, black, colored, and Indian—and mandated divisions across society, including in education, housing, employment, and marriage (Clark and Worger 2004). The 1953 Bantu Education Act strictly segregated schools and differentiated curricular content to suppress the educational opportunity of black South Africans. Public financing for education was also highly unequal. For example, in 1986, subsidies for white students were more than four times higher than those for black students (Vally 1999).

Owing in part to community protests and demands, the government of South Africa has significantly reformed education since the fall of apartheid, including systematically dismantling the segregated system (Kallaway, Kruss, Fataar, and Donn 1997; Motala and Pampallis 2001; Sayed, Subrahmanian, Soudien, and Carrim 2007). The right to a free basic public education was enshrined in the South African Constitution (Ahmed and Sayed 2009). The new government abolished what were previously racially separate education departments to create a unified department organized by province (Christie 2006; Fiske and Ladd 2004). Legal segregation was outlawed, and students were permitted to enroll in any school regardless of their race, provided there was space for them. The government also

passed a series of sweeping reforms to address social cohesion, expand access, and stem discrimination. These reforms included revised curricular content that eliminated racist language and promoted a unified national identity, and reformed teacher development and deployment and school-based programming to promote social cohesion (Chisholm 2003, 2004; Jansen 1999). A full treatment of South Africa’s broader reforms to support social cohesion is outside the scope of this article, as we focus more narrowly on education finance as a key redistributive policy.

Given the highly unequal financing within the education system during the apartheid era, an explicit goal of post-apartheid education policies has been to address educational inequality. As Mestry (2014) explains, “One of the chief objectives of South Africa’s government for the past eighteen years has been to improve the conditions in public schools by diminishing inequalities that exist between schools” (852). In this section, we discuss changes in resource allocation to schools, which is one of the primary policy arenas South Africa targeted for redistribution. Table 1 provides an overview of this policy, its evolution, and other key education policies referenced in our analysis.

Table 1: Overview of School Finance and Education Policies Discussed in This Study

Year	Educational Policy	Policy Goals
1990	White schools permitted to allow black student enrollment under specific conditions	To facilitate partial integration of schools under strict conditions, including the maintenance of a majority white student body and of “the white cultural ethos of the school” (Vally and Dalamba 1999, 10).
1993	Official desegregation of all schools	To allow schools to legally diversify; to remove legal barriers to desegregation (Vally and Dalamba 1999, 10)
1994	Teacher Post Provisioning	Equalize student-teacher ratios nationwide
1996	South African Schools Act	Establish school governing bodies that are allowed to levy compulsory school fees
1998	National Norms and Standards for School Funding (NNSF)	Establish policies guiding school funding. Directed provinces to spend 60 percent of educational budget on poorest 40 percent of schools.
1998	Fee exemptions	Amendment to SASA introduces school fee exemptions based on a means test for low-income households.
2006	Amended National Norms and Standards for School Funding (ANNSF)	Establish schools in Quintiles 1 and 2 as “no-fee schools”
2010	Quintile 3 Expansion	Expand “no-fee school” status to all schools in wealth Quintile 3

Early on, the post-apartheid government introduced efforts to promote local governance and redistribute resources in educational settings, including through policies governing school funding and teacher deployment. The 1996 South African Schools Act (SASA) decentralized control of the education system and required

all schools to create a democratically elected school governing body (SGB) (Hill 2016). Under SASA, the SGBs were encouraged to supplement official funds with outside funding, such as charging school fees. Nearly all students in South African schools were expected to pay school fees, despite provisions stating that students could not be denied access based on the inability to pay (Hill 2016). Given that the government covered the cost of teacher salaries, school fees were estimated to account for only a small portion of the overall operating budget. Nonetheless, they were thought to contribute to “enormous inequities between schools” (Motala and Sayed 2012, 20), as wealthy white families were able to pay substantially higher school fees than the historically poor and marginalized groups. In short, although SASA aimed to empower local communities in governance and decision-making, given the deep inequalities in local communities’ economic resources across South Africa, two major issues arose: first, many poor families simply could not afford school fees and, despite legal protections, were denied access; second, school fees led to significant differences in schools’ actual resources.

In 1998, recognizing that not all parents could afford school fees, the government passed an amendment to SASA that exempted parents from paying fees by introducing waivers. The policy established a means test for fee exemptions based on a family’s total income. To compensate schools for the waived fees, the government introduced a per-student allowance for each qualifying student, which did not necessarily reflect the actual school fees. However, only 2 percent of parents actually took advantage of the waivers (Garlick 2013); many others chose noncompliance by refusing to pay fees.

In 1998, the education department set new policies for school funding, known as the National Norms and Standards for School Funding (NNSSF). Under NNSSF, all schools were categorized under national wealth quintiles within each province, based on the characteristics of the surrounding community, including unemployment and illiteracy rates; national funding was then allocated on a progressive curve. Motala and Sayed (2012) note the redistributive intent of the policy, stating that it “acknowledges that the poor need greater support, but also that the apartheid legacy of poverty remains” (23). Nevertheless, the policy still encouraged the collection of fees in schools, which, as it did under SASA, put a significant financial burden on many families and was acknowledged in the policy itself as contributing to resource inequalities (Department of Basic Education 1998).

In a large-scale policy revision, the National Norms and Standards for School Funding were amended in 2006 (Ahmed and Sayed 2009). The revised version, the

Amended National Norms and Standards for School Funding (ANSSSF), became known as the “no-fee school policy” because it eliminated fees for schools in the poorest two wealth quintiles, with the government providing higher levels of per-student funding for non-personnel, non-capital expenditures. Funding allocations for Quintiles 3-5 were lower, and schools in these categories were expected to garner additional funds through fees. That said, the policy only affected non-personnel allocation, which was set at 20 percent of total expenditure.

In 2010, the ANSSSF policy was reformed to declare Quintile 3 schools no-fee schools. In 2013, the policy was again revised to ensure that all no-fee schools received the same allocation per student per year. In contrast, schools in Quintiles 4 and 5 were still designated as fee-collecting schools, and they received different allocations from the government (Table 2). Under the fee-exemption policy, learners enrolled in fee-paying schools were possibly eligible for a means-tested waiver, and schools received government allocations for each learner who qualified, up to the no-fee school funding level (Department of Basic Education 2015).

Table 2: Current Government Allocations to Schools by Quintile

School Quintile	Per-Student Allocation (ZAR)
Quintile 1	1,116
Quintile 2	1,116
Quintile 3	1,116
Quintile 4	559
Quintile 5	193

SOURCE: 2015 Department of Basic Education, Amended National Norms and Standards for School Funding.

Despite seemingly progressive post-apartheid education policies that have promoted redistribution, scholars have pointed out their limitations in promoting equity. For example, although the stated goal of the SGB policy was to improve local governance and participation in democracy (Ahmed and Sayed 2009), there was a disconnect between the goal and the actual results of the policy (Sayed and Soudien 2005), and between “idealist policies and actual experiences” (Christie 2006, 379). Scholars have pointed out that school administrators’ technical capacity challenges made it difficult in some cases to implement post-apartheid era reforms (Christie 2006). Additionally, Ahmed and Sayed (2009) observe that, due to major limitations of census data, it was hard to properly classify schools into quintiles.

While significant progress has been made in equalizing access and investments across racial groups (Brook Napier 2005; Chisholm 2003; Christie 1998; Fiske and Ladd 2004; Jansen 2002), apartheid legacies are still strong and opportunities, both in education and more broadly, remain highly unequal (Gilmour and Soudien 2009). This persistent inequality occurs because, when coupled with a macro-economic environment that does not devote more resources to education, the ability of the no-fee school policy to transform apartheid-era legacies has been limited (Christie 2006; Spreen and Vally 2006). It is ironic that schools in the wealthiest communities (Quintile 5) continue to be able charge school fees, which they use to exclude certain students, including lower class students who live in their vicinity. As a result, private schools and the formerly white elite schools, once termed Model-C schools, continue to offer a higher standard of education, while schools in the townships primarily serve black students and have fewer resources and lower outcomes (Soudien 2004). Given the Model-C schools' location in wealthier areas, scholars have argued that class is becoming a more important determinant of access to them than race (Fiske and Ladd 2004; Motala 2006; Soudien 2004, 2007).

Our study builds on this rich literature on post-apartheid education reform to further explore the connection of education finance reform to educational equity and social cohesion. Recent studies of the no-fee school policy tend to be literature or policy reviews, rather than empirical studies (see Mestry 2014). Ahmed and Sayed (2009) point to many potential problems with the no-fee school policy, but also argue convincingly that their study must be followed up with empirical data to understand “how the policy unfolds practically” (214). We bring empirical insights to the study of the no-fee school policy and its impact by drawing on a decade of household survey data and school-level administrative data.

Moreover, while numerous empirical studies have examined students' school access and outcomes, few studies have interrogated South African citizens' perceptions of post-apartheid education reforms more broadly. Gauging citizens' perceptions of their educational opportunities and experiences is particularly important to understanding the link between education and social cohesion. The literature suggests that how individuals perceive their opportunities relative to others is at least as important as objective inequalities (Stewart 2008). Moreover, because we have quantitative data from as recently as 2013 and interview data from 2015, we are able to examine attitudes following the 2010 reforms to the quintile classification system, which other studies have not yet examined.

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

Using a mixed-methods approach, which includes an analysis of nationally representative data sources and qualitative interviews with key stakeholders, this study assesses how the no-fee school policy has been implemented at the school level and to what effect. Specifically, to assess the extent to which the policy has improved equity and, consequently, contributed to social cohesion, we examine the school fees paid by households, the availability of school resources, and educators', parents', and household heads' perceptions of the policy's impact.

In our quantitative analysis, we use nationally representative general household surveys (GHS), education management information systems data, and Snap Survey of Ordinary Schools data to look at school access, and at the level and perceptions of school resources and household contributions to education. Because these surveys are conducted regularly and are comparable over time (within sources), we are able to examine shifts in key indicators and to compare estimates before and after implementation of the no-fee policy. Our analysis estimates national means using microdata from these data sources (applying survey weighting for the GHS data) and disaggregates by racial group and school quintile wherever possible.

To triangulate our quantitative findings and gain more nuanced insight into the impact the no-fee school policy has had on households and schools, we conducted qualitative fieldwork in Limpopo and Western Cape. These provinces were purposively sampled to maximize diversity, which typically is referred to as “most different” case selection, an approach that is invaluable to understanding heterogeneous settings like South Africa (Seawright and Gerring 2008). The two provinces are among the wealthiest (Western Cape) and poorest (Limpopo) provinces in the country. Limpopo is one of the most racially homogeneous provinces, whereas Western Cape is the only province in which the largest population group (whites) is a minority group at the national level. Table 3 profiles the two provinces.

In our interviews, we spoke with key stakeholders who had different perspectives on the education system: education officials, school administrators, teachers, and parents. All interviewees participated voluntarily and gave their informed consent. We worked with Department of Basic Education (DBE) officials in each province to identify participating schools, and visited a total of 19 schools in five districts.¹ School administrators were asked to select teachers and parents for us to speak

1 All interview and focus groups followed IRB guidelines.

with. While we aimed to conduct focus groups with a few teachers and parents at each school, the availability differed by school, especially of parents. In total, we interviewed 10 officials, 54 teachers, 20 school administrators, and 24 parents. Our interview and focus group questions asked about individuals' and the schools' backgrounds, student body composition, and general opinions on the perceived impact of key education policies, especially the no-fee school policy. Following our qualitative fieldwork, we analyzed all interview recordings and identified the key themes that emerged in relation to the no-fee school policy and other policy investments, school resources, and perceptions of equality and social cohesion.

As mentioned earlier, this study makes a unique contribution to the literature on the no-fee school policy and its effects by using empirical data—especially nationally representative survey data—to look at recent progress at the national level. For key indicators of school quality and household contributions to education, it considers both perceptions and actual estimates. In the next section, we discuss our findings on the emerging effects the no-fee school policy has had on education and equity in South Africa and its potential efficacy as a policy that builds social cohesion.

Table 3: Overview of Focus Provinces

	Limpopo	Western Cape
Population	5,404,868	5,822,734
Racial Breakdown of Population	Black/African 96.7% Coloured 0.3% Indian/Asian 0.3% White 2.6% Other 0.2%	Black/African 32.8% Coloured 48.8 % Indian/Asian 1.0% White 15.7% Other 1.6%
GDP per capita (USD)	4,259	8,694
Enrollment in Quintile 1-3 Schools	90.3 %	39.5 %

SOURCE: 2011 Census (Statistics South Africa 2012); Statistics South Africa 2011; authors' calculations using 2013 Snap Survey of Ordinary Schools data.

FINDINGS

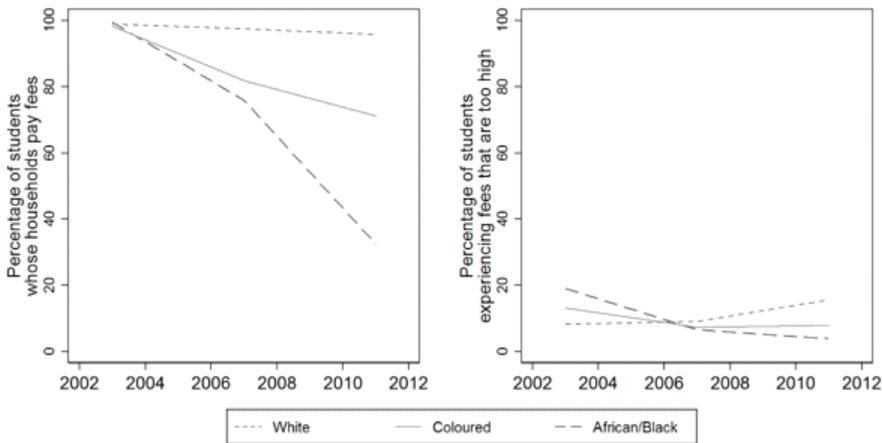
This section presents our findings on the effectiveness of South Africa's no-fee school policy as a redistribution policy. We begin by addressing the effects the policy has had on school fees and looking at South Africans citizens' perceptions of burden, and then discuss its influence on school resources. Finally, we examine issues that have compromised the policy's ability to impact equity and, as a likely result, social cohesion.

A PRO-POOR POLICY: ALLEVIATING FINANCIAL BURDEN

HOUSEHOLD CONTRIBUTIONS TO EDUCATION

To begin, we examine the effect the no-fee school policy has had on parental contributions to education. Figure 1 shows the percentage of South Africans, by racial group, who reported paying school fees over time, and Figure 2 shows the percentage of individuals who stated that the fees are too high. Prior to the implementation of the no-fee school policy, most South Africans reported paying fees in addition to buying textbooks and uniforms (although our interviews suggest that fee evasion was widespread). The fees posed a significant burden on many families. According to the DBE, in 2003, 56 percent of households in the poorest quintile stated that their children dropped out of school because of the cost of school fees (2009a). By 2011, after no-fee school status was extended to include Quintile 3 schools, the percentage of black South Africans paying fees went down to only 32.4 percent, while more than 95 percent of white South Africans continued to pay school fees.

Figure 1: Percentage of Primary and Secondary School Students Whose Households Pay School Fees; Figure 2: Percentage of Primary and Secondary School Students Who Experience School Fees That Are Too High



SOURCE: Authors' calculations using General Household Survey data.

In terms of the strain placed on families, black South Africans, compared to other groups, perceived school fees to be the most burdensome in 2003, with 19 percent saying that school fees were too high. In contrast, only 8 percent

of white South Africans said the same. By 2011, these perceptions seemed to have been reversed, with only 3.9 percent of black South Africans arguing that school fees were too high, compared to 15 percent of white South Africans. In qualitative interviews we conducted in Quintile 1-3 schools in both Western Cape and Limpopo provinces, teachers and administrators overwhelmingly agreed that the elimination of school fees was widely lauded by communities, as it reduced the financial burden on parents.

This shift in attitudes reflects the actual amount of fees paid. Table 4 shows how much families spent on school fees at the primary and secondary level by year (adjusted for inflation). Both white and colored families were paying higher fees in 2011 than in 2003, with white families seeing the steepest increase. It is clear that white South Africans not only continued to pay fees, the average amount of their fees increased over time. For white and colored families, this may indicate a shift toward enrolling their children in schools at the upper end of the spectrum or in independent schools.

Table 4: Average Primary and Secondary School Fees (ZAR) by Race and Year (adjusted for inflation)

Race	2003	2007	2011
African/Black	480.38	514.00	468.62
Coloured	960.24	949.13	1151.43
White	5,330.34	5,777.24	6682.82

SOURCE: Authors' calculations using General Household Survey data.

These changes in perception may have important implications for social cohesion. Black South Africans clearly perceive themselves as better off in 2011 because of the no-fee school policy. On the other hand, white South Africans, who are less likely to attend no-fee schools, have not only seen no benefit but have seen—to their dissatisfaction—the average amount they pay in school fees rise.

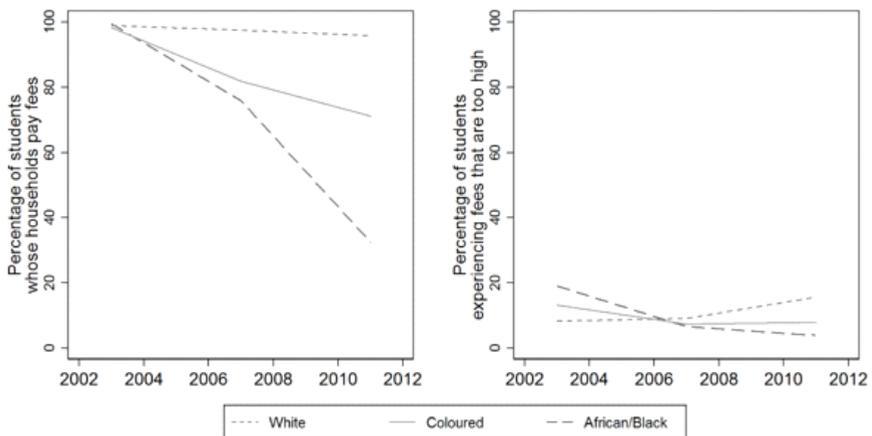
SCHOOL RESOURCES AND ENVIRONMENT

One of the most important benefits of the no-fee school policy is that it has allowed schools to have a stable and predictable baseline of resources to pay for non-salary recurrent costs, including teaching and learning materials. After 1994, it was illegal to exclude students based on their ability to pay, and the high rates of noncompliance meant that schools operated with severely limited budgets

and had limited resources for upkeep, maintenance, and learning materials. For example, teachers we interviewed explained that, before their school became a no-fee school, parents did not pay or paid only part of the school fees, which reduced the school’s income. These findings align with a 2009 study conducted by the DBE (2009b), which found that “71 percent of the surveyed no-fee schools indicated that they are able to provide better services with their school allocations as compared to when they were collecting fees” (6). Thus, the no-fee school policy can be linked directly to improved school resources in lower income communities.

These interview findings are supported by nationally representative data on household heads’ perceptions of their children’s school environment. Figure 3 presents the percentage of South Africans who stated that their school lacks books; in 2003, almost 25 percent of black South African students did not have textbooks, compared to only 1.8 percent of white students. By 2011, this percentage had fallen significantly to only 6.3 percent of black South Africans and had also fallen slightly for colored South Africans. In contrast, the percentage of white South African students who did not have textbooks actually increased modestly to 3.7 percent, although they were the least likely to state that they experienced a lack of books. Figure 4 shows similarly that South Africans’ perceptions of their school facilities also improved, particularly among black South Africans: the percentage of black South Africans who felt that their school had bad facilities dropped from 12.3 percent in 2003 to 4.4 percent in 2011.

Figure 3: Percentage of Primary and Secondary School Students Experiencing a Lack of Textbooks; Figure 4: Percentage of Primary and Secondary School Students Experiencing School Facilities in “Bad” Condition



SOURCE: Authors’ calculations using General Household Survey data

TEACHER AVAILABILITY

We also looked at pupil-teacher ratios in public schools by wealth quintile at two points in time, 2006 and 2013.² Table 5 shows that pupil-teacher ratios have declined slightly for public schools in all wealth quintiles, and that pupil-teacher ratios in no-fee schools are not substantially different from those in Quintile 4 fee-paying schools. However, schools in Quintile 5 still have lower pupil-teacher ratios than those in other quintiles. In fact, in accordance with SASA, fee-paying schools can hire additional teachers with the funds they generate from fees and outside fundraising. For example, we visited a Quintile 5 school where the SGB paid for 16 full-time teachers. Having the additional teachers helped to keep class size small and manageable, which our interviewees said created strong disparities in the quality of teaching students received.

Table 5: Pupil-Teacher Ratios by School Quintile and Year

	Quintile 1	Quintile 2	Quintile 3	Quintile 4	Quintile 5
2006	31.5	32.9	33.4	34.4	27.0
2013	29.2	29.8	31.9	31.7	26.0

SOURCE: Authors' calculations using Snap Survey of Ordinary Schools data.

In short, it is clear that the no-fee policy has helped provide a minimum resource base for all schools and reduced the burden of paying fees, improved the school environment, and increased the availability of teachers over the past decade. While GHS and Snap Survey of Ordinal Schools data do not allow us to attribute changes to a particular policy, they do demonstrate that changes register at the national level. Responses from the interviews provide more policy insight and suggest that the ANSSSF has been a key factor in easing the burden of school fees, especially in black households, and has played a role in providing schools with a baseline of resources. We argue, therefore, that the no-fee school policy can be considered reasonably effective as a pro-poor policy, in that it has had a differentially large and positive impact on the poorest and historically marginalized populations. However, its potency as an equity-building policy (and thus a policy that advances social cohesion) is less clear—and the topic we turn to next.

² Although we would like to examine the change over a longer period, we do not have teacher data prior to 2006.

LITTLE ACTUAL REDISTRIBUTION

Despite some successes in alleviating the financial burden of fees for black families and improving educational resources in poorer areas, our findings—including the finding above that better pupil-teacher ratios have been maintained in Quintile 5 schools—indicate that the no-fee school policy has not had a substantive impact on equity. In this section, we discuss the fact that, despite its progressive funding allocation, the no-fee school policy has been unable so far to address the systemic inequalities affecting education in South Africa, including (a) persistent gaps in school resources, owing in part to the schools' different opportunities to raise funds through fees and other means; and (b) de facto housing segregation.

PERSISTENT GAPS IN SCHOOL RESOURCES

Although the no-fee policy has redistributive goals, considerable and predictable resource gaps remain across schools. These gaps stem in part from schools' different ability to raise funds through fees in wealthier and poorer communities, which simultaneously allows schools to exclude students who cannot pay fees on the grounds of class, language, or race, and thus exacerbates inequalities in resources. Table 4 shows that white families pay more now than in the past for their children's education, and that the amount they pay is roughly six times what the government provides per pupil in no-fee schools. In the aggregate, this likely means that the absolute difference in school resources between schools with more white students and those serving primarily black students is larger now than before the no-fee school policy was implemented. It is important to point out that this is not due to government policy but to the fact that spending by white (and, for the most part, wealthy) parents has outpaced government investment. While we caution that information on school fees provides only an approximate view of school budgets and that other factors play into school finances, the widening gap in effective school fees paid between 2003 and 2011 clearly suggests that the no-fee school policy has most likely not been able to equalize resources across schools.

In addition to widening the gap in family contributions, unintended consequences stemming from issues with the school quintile classification system mean that there are large inequalities in school resources even within Quintile 4 and 5 schools. Prior research has been critical of the poor quality data on quintile classification and its implications for achieving equity (Mestry 2014). Our study found similarly that some fee-charging schools technically classified as Quintile 4 or 5 serve many low-income students. This is because, due to data constraints, the ANSSSF classifies schools into quintiles based on characteristics of the community

surrounding the school, rather than on the characteristics of the students who attend the school. As a result, it is not uncommon for fee-paying schools to serve very poor students who happen to live in wealthier catchment areas. In practice, this means that some students who are the intended beneficiaries of ANSSSF do not benefit from it and, as we discuss later, that school budgets suffer when these students cannot or do not pay school fees.

Indeed, one of the most surprising findings from our fieldwork was that some Quintile 4 and 5 schools struggle to provide basic teaching and learning resources because they cannot collect fees from all students. For example, one teacher from a school with fees explained that only 62 percent of the expected fees were collected, and another observed that parents have fallen “into a culture of non-payment.” When a school is classified as Quintile 4 or 5, the school receives less than half the amount from the government as it would if it were a no-fee school. For schools serving lower income students, this results in their having a smaller operating budget than if they had been designated no-fee schools. A DBE (2009b) article based on surveys with school principals recognized this problem, explaining that “most schools in urban areas servicing poor communities lose a large portion of their school income due to fee exemptions granted to poor parents” (9). Others have observed this challenge and attributed it to the inaccurate formulation of quintile designations for some schools (Ahmed and Sayed 2009), which our more recent empirical findings affirm to be an ongoing difficulty—even with the amendments to the no-fee school policy.

For example, the principal of a Quintile 5 secondary school in Western Cape explained that, in his school, “it’s not strange for the school to have no telephone connection, because we don’t have money to pay the telephone [bill].” In a Quintile 4 school, teachers said that many students did not have textbooks because they could not afford to buy them, and the government did not provide them as it did for no-fee schools. As a result, although the school was a Quintile 4, teachers often had to resort to using photocopies for lessons, rather than textbooks. Thus, some fee-paying schools’ inability to collect fees in full has had a severe impact on their ability to meet even basic expenditures for educational resources.

This challenge is exacerbated by the fact that schools also have very different resource legacies—for example, better instructional spaces, sports fields, and extracurricular facilities—and abilities to mobilize additional financial resources. For example, former Model-C schools, which were previously white-only public schools, have superior resource legacies. They tend to be located in wealthy residential areas with a more affluent student base, and thus are better able to

garner additional financial support from alumni communities and other local fundraising sources than schools in poorer communities. Moreover, because school-fee policies are set by the SGB, these schools can use school fees or selective scholarships to enroll a highly selective student body.

DE FACTO HOUSING AND COMMUNITY SEGREGATION

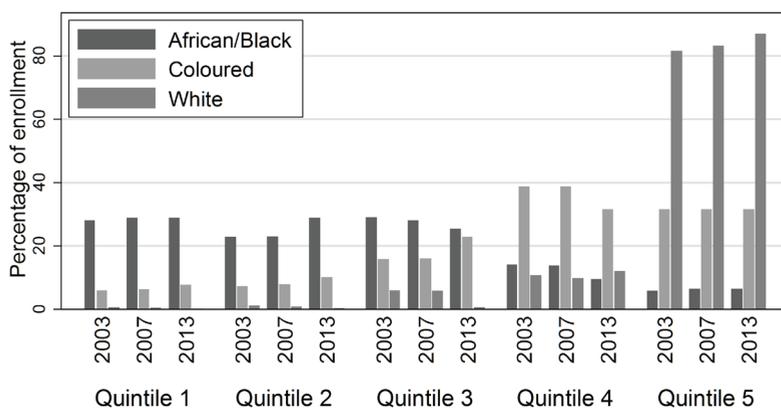
The ability of the no-fee school policy to influence equity in education is further constrained by de facto housing and community segregation and their impact on school access. Homogeneity in communities stems in part from apartheid policies that created racially and ethnically distinct township communities, and in part from newly created government housing settlements for low-income families in some areas. Interview respondents explained that this lack of diversity within communities is reflected in the schools—that is, that the tendency for racial or class groups to be spatially concentrated undermines the potential for greater integration in the schools and, consequently, reduces the chances that a larger share of poorer students will be able to access elite schools.

In theory, poorer students can access fee-paying schools. According to SASA, students can apply to any school outside their immediate geographic area and, since 1998, the government has given a per-student allowance to fee-paying schools that enroll students who cannot pay the fees. While the central aim of the no-fee school policy is redistribution rather than integration, the overlap of race and class in South Africa means that black students are more likely to qualify for exemptions and, as a result, that the policy has the potential to promote racial integration in fee-paying schools. However, the level of exemption is sometimes lower than the actual amount of the fees collected by a school, which is a disincentive for fee-paying schools to admit students who qualify for exemptions. Coupled with the fact that schools rarely have space for all who apply, the result is that very few students who qualify for school fee exemptions are actually granted admission.

In an example offered by one of our interviewees, students in a township area travelled more than seven kilometers to get to a no-fee school, even though the elite school in the area was closer to the informal settlements they lived in. However, because the elite school said it had no space for additional students, students were not able to get exemptions to attend there. One interviewee strongly believed that this technical issue of exemptions was a façade used to allow elite public schools to select their desired student bodies while masking ongoing racial and class-based discrimination.

To examine quantitatively how school composition has changed, possibly facilitated by the no-fee school policy, we analyzed Education Management Information Systems data on the racial breakdown of enrollment by school wealth quintile.³ Results are presented in Figure 5, which shows that the distribution of students has not changed significantly over the past decade. However, there was a higher concentration of black and colored students in the lowest three quintiles in 2013 than before the ANSSSF was passed. Black students are proportionally more likely to attend Quintile 1 and 2 schools than Quintile 3-5 schools, and colored students are more likely to attend Quintile 3 and 4 schools than they were before the no-fee school policy. In contrast, the percentage of white students attending Quintile 5 schools, already high in 2003 at nearly 82 percent, reached 87 percent by 2013. Moreover, almost no white students were attending schools in Quintiles 1-3 by 2013.

Figure 5: Distribution of Primary and Secondary School Enrollment by Race, Year, and School Wealth Quintile



SOURCE: Authors' calculations using General Household Survey data.

Using these data in combination with self-reports on the level of fees students paid (Table 4), it appears that, in the wake of the no-fee school policy, schools in Quintiles 4 and 5 may have raised fees, which pushed less wealthy colored students into Quintile 3 schools and ensured that only a very small percentage of black students could afford to enroll in the fee-paying schools. Even if the fees were raised purely in the name of higher quality, one outcome has been to maintain the disparity between students of different racial groups.

³ Data provided by EMIS Unit/DBE through personal communication, March 26, 2015.

Importantly, the growing inequality in access to elite (Quintile 5) schools demonstrated in Figure 5 has implications for social cohesion, as it was a clear source of grievance among black South Africans in our interviews. Under SASA, school management committees and governing bodies have substantial control over who is accepted, particularly when there is high demand, as there is in elite public schools. As in the example above, the perception of some black South Africans we spoke with was that the admissions process in historically white schools was sometimes racially biased. In another example, a teacher in Western Cape explained that she had applied for her students or some of the top learners from the township school to enroll in a formerly white school many times but they were never accepted. She stated, “That’s what I’m always saying—it all goes back to race. I always feel that they are chasing away our kids in their schools, but they don’t want to say it.” A second teacher added, “They are depriving kids of their rights because they are black.” Though allegations of racism are difficult to verify, it has been widely observed that racism continues to be a challenge in South African schools (Ndimande 2012; Vally 1999).

In other cases, interview respondents felt that schools sometimes used the language of instruction as an excuse to keep out poor or black students. One interviewee elaborated further, suggesting that education policies have become new platforms for segregation: “The difference is that in the apartheid era the segregation was official, now it is unofficial.” In such cases, although South Africa has created mechanisms to make access to historically advantaged schools more equal, demand for admission to such schools outstrips their capacity.

Of course, there are exceptions. Our interviews also suggest that exemptions may facilitate integration in select fee-paying schools. At the very least, some of our respondents perceived elite schools, especially former Model C schools, to be more racially diverse than less well-resourced schools. This may be because elite schools, with their strong resource legacies and funding bases, can support students who qualify for exemptions, even though government subsidies for students receiving exemptions tend to be only a portion of what the school would collect in fees. This means that, even though we heard that such schools tend to be disproportionately white and Indian compared to the actual population in South Africa, former Model C and other elite schools may reflect the diversity of the Rainbow Nation somewhat more than less well-resourced schools.

In sum, although South Africa’s education finance policies aim to be redistributive, their ability to address longstanding inequalities is limited. In practice, the

divisions by class, race, and homogeneous housing settlements undermine the effectiveness of the no-fee school policy in promoting equal access to elite schools.

DISCUSSION

Overall, we find that the school funding norms pursued by South Africa in the wake of apartheid have brought up the bottom by providing substantial redress to historically disadvantaged populations, including black and colored populations. Specifically, the no-fee school policy has reduced the financial burden for poor families and, by guaranteeing a significant funding base to all schools regardless of the local community's ability to pay, provides a base level of school resources. This leads us to conclude that the no-fee school policy, despite the challenges involved in its implementation, has been a powerful pro-poor education policy.

However, as an equity-building policy its efficacy is limited. There are still substantial inequalities in school funding in South Africa. Earlier reviews have also noted this, observing that school fees continue to result in unequal school resources, despite more equal per-pupil state spending (Motala 2006). Moreover, inequalities do not occur only between schools in poorer and richer communities: implementation issues mean that, when some Quintile 4 and 5 schools serving low-income students have struggled to collect school fees, the students do not receive adequate resources.

Furthermore, the design of the no-fee school policy means it can do little to address historically unequal resource legacies, thus the gap between no-fee schools and fee-paying schools in the top quintile remains large. Despite mechanisms intended to equalize school access, divisions originally rooted in racial segregation are increasingly inscribed along socioeconomic lines and are, in part, reinforced by the no-fee school policy. Wealthier black and colored families from poorer communities may send their children to better resourced, more diverse schools outside of their communities when they can afford the school fees, but less well-resourced schools do not attract white or Indian students. Given the overlap of race and class in South Africa, this means in practice that most Quintile 1 and 2 schools serve only black learners, and there is little potential for more diverse student bodies in these schools. Moreover, the concentration of white students in Quintile 5 schools is higher than ever, suggesting that access to those schools has not become more equal.

Because of its limited effects on equity, we argue that the no-fee school policy, while a beneficial education policy, has had limited ability to effect redistribution, and therefore it has likely had a limited impact on social cohesion. Even though black South Africans are more satisfied with the availability of basic resources in their schools now, our interviews reveal that some are unhappy with their access to elite educational opportunities—a grievance substantiated by their low share of enrollment in Quintile 5 schools. Moreover, our analysis reveals that some white South Africans are discontented with their school fees and school facilities, meaning that malaise over education extends to the historically advantaged white population. This discontent demonstrates the delicacy of the relationship between redistribution and social cohesion, and the challenges redistributive policy-making must negotiate. Indeed, while equality is essential to social cohesion in the long term, the process of redistribution risks creating instability in the short term if disadvantaged groups see these efforts as insufficient, or if advantaged groups see them as unjust.

CONCLUSION

This case study has examined the no-fee school policy as having redistributive aims and, thus, the potential to improve equity and social cohesion. It has demonstrated both the positive impact and the limitations of investment in progressive education under the policy.

The case illustrates several important points for those interested in the relationship between education and social cohesion. First, we note that the no-fee school policy has made real strides forward as a pro-poor policy by reducing the burden of school fees for black households and improving resources in the lower quintile schools. However, these gains have not been equalizing, and gaps in resources remain because elite schools are able to maintain stronger funding levels, in part through school fees. Moreover, durable legacies of segregation, like racially homogeneous housing settlements, undermine the opportunity for a greater share of black students to access elite schools.

While the no-fee school policy is widely lauded for its contributions to lower income schools and communities, its broader inability to equalize access to upper quintile schools—and the higher quality learning opportunities they are seen to offer—has generated grievances among some black South Africans. There are also complaints from some fee-paying schools that serve low-income students, which feel that they face resource constraints because they cannot collect the school fees

they rely on and are not compensated sufficiently by the government. We argue that these grievances undermine efforts to strengthen social cohesion in South African society and raise questions about how education systems can build equity.

It is important to note that these challenges occur despite ongoing investment in policy research and evaluation by the South African government, and despite its responsive revisions to the no-fee school policy that aim to improve its effectiveness. Ultimately, as this case illustrates and many have argued, it is extremely difficult to design and implement policies that aim to correct decades of oppression.

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