

**‘Cultural capital in the wrong currency’: the reflective accounts of scholarship students attending elite secondary schools**

Jennifer Feldman<sup>a\*</sup> and Jennifer Wallace<sup>b</sup>

Orchid ID J Feldman: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9367-0980>

*<sup>a</sup>Department of Education Policy Studies, Stellenbosch University, Stellenbosch, South Africa*

*<sup>b</sup>School of Education, University of Cape Town, South Africa*

\*Corresponding author. Email: [jfeldman@sun.ac.za](mailto:jfeldman@sun.ac.za)

## **‘Cultural capital in the wrong currency’: the reflective accounts of scholarship students attending elite secondary schools**

This article investigates the awarding of scholarships to students from historically disadvantaged communities to attend elite schools in South Africa. Specifically, the article analyses the narrated accounts of a sample of former scholarship recipients who reflect back on their experiences of entering an elite secondary school as scholarship students. Using Bourdieu’s notion of cultural capital and symbolic violence to explain the interviewees’ experiences in the elite school space, the article shows that in the educational setting of post-apartheid South Africa, success in one part of an educational field does not necessarily equate to success in another. Further, providing students with the financial means to access elite education does not mean that they enter into the school contexts as ‘equal players’. As such, what the article highlights, is that the acceptance of a scholarship for students from historically disadvantaged communities, is far more complex and multi-layered than is anticipated by all stakeholders.

Keywords: scholarship programmes; elite schools; cultural capital; symbolic violence; South African schooling

### **Introduction**

Situated within the context of schooling of the post-apartheid South African landscape, this article draws on a research project titled *The Gift of a Scholarship: The reflective accounts of scholarship recipients attending elite secondary schools in post-apartheid South Africa*. The project involved interviews with twenty scholarship recipients who reflected on their encounters within the field of elite<sup>1</sup> secondary schooling. The focus of this article is on problematising the assumption that access to elite schooling through the

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this article, and drawing on international literature, affluent public and private schools will be described as elite. This definition will be discussed in more detail in the literature review section.

awarding of a scholarship<sup>2</sup> equates to ‘equal access’ for the scholarship recipients. Or, put another way, that the provision of the financial means to attend elite schools positions the students as ‘equal players’ in the elite school context. This assumption is situated in the meritocracy debate that suggests that “if you have what it takes – you have the ‘ability’ and work hard” (Thomson, 2017, p. 18) you will most likely succeed in your educational endeavours. However, as the accounts of the scholarship students reveal, this experience is more complex and multi-layered than possibly anticipated by all the role players involved in the process.

In order to analyse and understand the scholarship students’ accounts of their experiences in the elite secondary school context, the article draws on Bourdieu’s concepts of cultural capital and symbolic violence. For Bourdieu, cultural capital refers to the accumulation of knowledge, skills and know-how that advantages an individual and gives them status in society (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 138). Bourdieu (1985) maintains that power within a particular social setting, or field, depends on position, and this is in part determined by the amount and type of capital that an individual possesses. Related to cultural capital, Bourdieu’s concept of symbolic violence is used to understand how the students ended up blaming themselves and families for their shortcomings, rather than the structures of the elite school system. Grenfell (2008, p. 184) states that symbolic violence “results when we misrecognize, as natural, those systems of classification that are actually culturally arbitrary and historical”. Thus, a form of ‘violence’ is imposed on people by forcing them to adhere to the common rules and

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<sup>2</sup> Although in literature the terms ‘scholarship’ and ‘bursary’ are sometimes used interchangeably, this article uses the term ‘scholarship’ as this is the term used by the donor foundations for the financial aid provided for the students.

regularities of a field as universal concepts. Such violence is usually achieved indirectly (symbolically), rather than being explicit or overt (Mills, 2008). As such, symbolic violence is often not recognized as such and “is an effective and efficient form of domination in that members of the dominant classes need exert little energy to maintain their dominance” (Schubert, 2008, p. 184).

The article starts by providing the contextual landscape for the research study on which this article is based, with a specific focus on elite schooling and the awarding of scholarships to students who have been historically disadvantaged within the South Africa context. Following this is an overview of the relevant literature in relation to scholarship students within elite institutions, and the methodological process adhered to within the research. The next section, and main discussion of the article, draws on the student data from the research project and Bourdieu’s concepts of capital and symbolic violence to problematise the awarding of scholarships to historically disadvantaged students to attend elite schools. The article concludes by providing a summative account of the scholarship recipients’ reflections on their encounter with the elite school field.

### ***The contextual landscape of the study***

Historically, traditions of English-speaking schools in South Africa may be dated to British colonial interests, first through the establishment of colonies in the Cape and Natal in the 1800s after Britain took over the Cape from the Batavian Republic, and subsequently through the Union of South Africa as a British dominion after 1910. Church schools and other private schools were established in the Cape Colony in the 1800s, together with a number of prestigious public schools, and the legacy of private and church schools was continued along with the expansion of English-speaking

settlements and the growth of a well-resourced public education system for white citizens across the country.

Before 1948, all education for black people in South Africa was in the hands of missionaries. The introduction of the system of apartheid saw this control shift to the hands of the state, accompanied by an intensification of the separation of schooling along racial lines with the passing of the Bantu Education Act of 1953.<sup>3</sup> Thus, a significant historical legacy of the South African education system is that before the early 1990s, the well-resourced public schools in the country were exclusively for white students, with all of the benefits of apartheid that were afforded to them, while schools allocated to black students were significantly under-resourced. Private and religious schools continued to operate separate to the state system.

The decade of the 1990s saw the ending of the apartheid laws and the ensuing negotiated settlement, followed by the first democratic elections that brought with it significant changes in education in an attempt to redress the divisions and inequalities of the past. Although the South African Schools Act of 1996 (Department of Basic Education, 1996) formally outlawed discrimination and legislated the policies and modalities for a new non-racial, non-sexist and equitable education system for all public schools, the gap between policy and implementation has been enormously challenging to bridge. As Fiske and Ladd (2004) highlight, although there were positive moves

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<sup>3</sup> Under the Bantu Education Act (No. 47 of 1953), education was divided along racial lines, with separate education departments for white, Indian, coloured and African South Africans, as well as schools, curricula and the allocation of resources. The lion's share of government support and resources was allocated to the schools for white students, followed by those allocated to Indian and coloured students. The schools for African students received a negligible amount of the state coffers in comparison to the white schools. For every R1 that was spent on educating an African child, R17 was spent educating a white child (Motala et al., 2007).

towards racial equity in the sense that the demographics of many formerly white schools changed in the decade of democracy, this has not translated into overall equal educational opportunity nor adequacy. Consequently, the system of public education that is accessible to the majority of South Africa's (predominantly black) population has remained mostly in a state of crisis, as has been well-researched (see for example Bloch, 2009; Fiske & Ladd, 2004; Gilmour & Soudien, 2009; Spaul, 2013; Taylor et al., 2008).

The 1990s also saw changes taking place in the South African independent (formerly known as private) schooling sector. Although a number of independent schools had opened their doors to students of all races from the late 1970s and into the 1980s, the number of black students in most of these schools remained small, with the relatively high school fees charged by these schools acting as one of the barriers. With the advent of democracy, and the increased economic opportunities available to all South Africans, the demographics within many of the independent schools have shifted, with these schools vying with privileged public schools to be the school of choice for the children of the emerging black middle- and upper-classes.

However, for the most part, the most well-resourced and affluent (elite) public and independent schools in the country are still struggling to 'shake' the pervasive historical association between 'elite schools' and 'whiteness', and 'white privilege' (Epstein, 2014). Research indicates that the dominant culture within many of these schools has remained mostly Eurocentric and middle-class in nature (see for example Dolby, 2001; Fataar, 2015; Soudien, 2007), and many of these schools struggle to attract a more diverse student body that is indicative of the demographics of the country. As such, a scholarship programme that is aimed at bringing historically disadvantaged, financially needy students into elite school contexts presents one way for these schools

to diversify their student body, and at the same time provides them with an opportunity of “disavowing their elite-ness” (Kenway & Fahey, 2015, p. 110).

### *The provision of scholarships to attend elite schools*

The offering of scholarship opportunities to promising students from disadvantaged backgrounds is prevalent in the education sector both internationally and within the South African context. Scholarships, described as a form of benefaction or benevolence (Geyer & Walton, 2015; Kenway & Fahey, 2015) have become an accepted and even praise-worthy practice at most elite schools. The opportunity to receive a quality education is generally touted as the panacea for being able to access further educational opportunities and ultimately professional employment, especially for students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The awarding of scholarships to attend an elite school generally is presented by the donor foundations and partner schools as a relatively straightforward transaction that involves three leading ‘players’: a *candidate* who successfully meets the criteria stipulated by *donor foundations* is provided with the financial means to attend a *partner school* that has been selected for its offer of “high academic standards and a holistic approach to education” (Foundation 1 website, 2019). In accepting the scholarship, the recipient enters into a contractual agreement with the donor as well as the school whereby they commit to working hard, and adhering to the school’s code of conduct.

### *The donor foundations*

The providers of the scholarships to the participants in the research study were two selected donor foundations which for anonymity will be referred to as Foundation 1 and Foundation 2. Both of the selected foundations outline, more or less explicitly on their

websites and accompanying documentation, their vision of the ‘ideal recipient’ as someone who will play a future role in determining social change for the better.

Foundation 1 is underpinned by a global financial investment company, and its explicit, long-term goal is “to cultivate high-impact responsible entrepreneurship” in order to “make a sustainable, long-term contribution to Southern Africa” by strengthening the country’s economy (Foundation 1 website, 2019). This it hopes to achieve through the awarding of scholarships to Grade 7 students each year to attend one of 30+ partner secondary schools located in four of the nine South African provinces. Its documentation states that its scholarship programme was established to provide access to “quality educational opportunities for historically disadvantaged individuals in Southern Africa in preparation for their tertiary studies” (Foundation 1 website, 2019). In addition to “demonstrated financial need” and evidence of the academic potential to “excel”, a successful applicant must possess an “entrepreneurial mindset”. Foundation 2 was established, and continues to be funded, by an international philanthropic couple who set up a foundation with one of its key initiatives being the establishment of a scholarship programme to provide Western Cape learners who show academic potential the opportunity to attend “some of Cape Town’s best high schools” (Foundation 2 website, 2019).

### *The partner schools*

The second ‘players’ in the scholarship process are the secondary schools selected by Foundations 1 and 2 as partner schools. These schools are a mix of public and independent, single-sex and co-educational, and boarding and day schools. The schools are all located in relatively affluent, former white suburbs, and have spacious and well-maintained school properties, excellent facilities and resources. The vast majority of

fee-paying students who attend these schools are from middle and upper-class homes, and many have attended the schools' elite 'feeder' primary schools.

### *The scholarship recipients*

The third 'players' within this practice are the students who are the recipients of the scholarship, as well as less directly, their families and communities. These students, as representatives of the youth of post-apartheid South Africa, face the challenges of the deep-seated inequalities that exist within the education system. However, studies such as those conducted by Dolby (2001), Soudien (Soudien, 2007) and Fataar (2015) indicate that despite the many, at times almost insurmountable, obstacles that face young South Africans, and especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, the capacity for agency exists. For the participants in the study, their initial sense of agency is evident in their application for, and acceptance of, a scholarship to attend an elite school. What the article seeks to present is their initial encounters and engagement with the world of elite schooling, and what this experience entailed for these scholarship recipients.

Before moving into the main discussion, the following section presents an overview of the relevant literature, the research design that informed the study and a statement about ethics and validity of the research data.

### **Literature Review**

While there exists a growing body of literature on international elite schools and higher education institutions, there is only limited research available on elite schools in South Africa in relation to students who enter these institutions from a different racial, socioeconomic, cultural or religious background to that reflected by the schools'

dominant culture. The limited research that does exist, either within the global or the South African context, tends to highlight the schools' perspectives rather than the voices and experiences of the students themselves.

With regards to the term 'elite schools', it is notable that there is not one distinct definition in the literature for elite schools. An international, multi-sited ethnographic project titled, *Elite Independent Schools in Globalising Circumstances*<sup>4</sup> defines elite schools in very broad terms as being "primary and secondary schools of very high rank" (Kenway et al., 2017, p. 1). An explanation for this broad framing is provided by Kenway and Koh (2015), drawing on a study by Rizvi (2014), who state that the category of 'elite school' is not "an un-subjective, universal or timeless category. Elite schools rise and fall, new types emerge and make status claims, older types stand firm or falter." (Kenway & Koh, 2015, p. 1) Additionally, what may be considered 'elite' in one place, might not be considered 'elite' in another. Given this, Kenway and Koh (2015) argue that the "notion of an 'elite school' must be historicised and spatialized" (p. 1). In other words, both the contextual period of time as well as the socio-geographical location needs to be taken into account when considering what should, or should not, be regarded as an 'elite' school.

By applying this 'time-space framework' to the traditional English-speaking South African elite schools included in this article research, it is evident that they share many features with global elite schools located in countries with a common colonial

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<sup>4</sup> The project was conducted over a five-year period from 2010 to 2014, and its core research team consisted of Jane Kenway, Johannah Fahey, Fazal Rizvi, Aaron Koh, Cameron McCarthy and Debbie Epstein. The research was conducted in seven 'elite' schools located in Australia, Barbados, England, Hong Kong, India, Singapore, and South Africa.

past. At the same time, however, these South African schools reflect specific characteristics that are related to this country's past.

In relation to the focus of this article and the scholarship student data presented, the literature review is divided into two sub-themes. The first theme highlights aspects of assimilationist practices of elite schools. Soudien (2012) describes this approach in schools as one that allows the dominant group to remain intact while the subordinate group are required to assimilate into the dominant culture of the school. The second theme describes the practices of elite schools as purveyors of social success - that is, the conscious effort on the part of elite schools to instil in their students the skills and mindset deemed relevant for success in tertiary studies and beyond, along with access to social and global networks.

### *Assimilationist endeavours of elite schools*

Geyer and Walton (2015) in their study of an elite South African school assert that although the demographics have shifted in most elite post-apartheid South African schools, many still bear the residues of Randall's (1982) descriptions of independent, English-speaking schools in his book, *Little England on the veld: the English private school system in South Africa*. Randall (1982) provides a discussion on the extent to which English-speaking independent schools in South Africa closely resemble, often in conscious imitation, private schools in Britain. According to Randall, this resemblance is in relation to the schools' organizational cultures, religious traditions, the language of instruction, uniform, and hierarchical systems and structures. Thus, as Geyer and Walton (2015) assert, part of the 'fitting in' required by the scholarship recipients in their study involved them learning to assimilate into the new school space. This included the students learning to navigate the socioeconomic differences that they

encountered, whilst at the same time conforming to the norms and expectations of the elite school context. The authors argue that for the students this process involved assuming an “invisible presence” by being reserved and quiet, and assimilating into the dominant culture of the school (Geyer & Walton, 2015, p. 107).

Similarly, a study conducted within the South African context by Epstein (2014) discusses the experiences of marginalised students in a South African elite girls-only secondary school. The author states that as a consequence of assimilation, the “few black South African students at the school have to bear the burden of ... their own experience of changing their demeanour and clothing to fit in with white norms [that] results in their being seen as ‘coconuts’<sup>5</sup> by their peers in the townships from which they are drawn.” (p. 259) This study shows that students assimilating into elite school environments does not only impact on the individual but also on the students’ home and their wider communities.

A study conducted within a predominantly white elite independent school in California documents the experiences of six African American senior students (Horvat & Antonio, 1999). The study pays special attention to the interaction between African American students and the school’s organizational and cultural context, and reports that all the participants in the study described feeling that they had “to leave a part of their identity behind” (Horvat & Antonio, 1999, p. 334) when they entered their elite school environment. This included, amongst other things: changing the way they spoke or changing their pattern of speech; listening to different forms of popular (white) music;

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<sup>5</sup> ‘Coconut’ is a colloquial term, usually used in a disparaging manner, by black South Africans to describe someone who thinks, acts and speaks like a ‘white person’ (white on the inside), even though their skin (on the outside) is black (McKinney, 2017).

and surrendering their sense of racial pride and belonging. At the same time, however, the authors found that the subjects of their study willingly made these changes in order to receive the benefits of an elite education – the price of mobility that was recognized and accepted by both the marginalised girls as well as their parents (Horvat & Antonio, 1999). One of these benefits was that “they learned to navigate the often tricky terrain of life in the white world around them”, as well as feeling that they gained access to a “superior academic education and a virtual entrance ticket into a selective four-year college.” (Horvat & Antonio, 1999, pp. 336–337)

A second American study, by Kuriloff and Reichert (2003), presents a similar finding. This study involved low-income students of all racial backgrounds attending an elite, boys-only school. The study finds that many of the boys expressed feelings of anger and frustration, and blamed themselves for their social and academic shortcomings, describing themselves as inadequate. The strategies that they employed to cope involved “mastering ‘a drill’ that included hard work, unwavering commitment, a will to win, a cool style, and self-knowledge as learners.” (Kuriloff & Reichert, 2003, p. 751) As with the girls in Horvat and Antonio’s (1999) study, the accompanying personal sacrifices were deemed by the boys to be necessary and worthwhile as the participants recognized that ultimately “all boys at Haverford have a bright future” (Kuriloff & Reichert, 2003, p. 767).

In the next section we discuss research on elite schools that highlights how these schools consider the importance of instilling in their students the skills and mindset deemed relevant for success.

### *Elite schools as purveyors of 'social success'*

An article by Kenway and Fahey (2014) examines the strategies employed by elite schools to ensure that their students 'stay ahead of the game'. The authors refer to these strategies as the schools' "grooming curricula" that involves "hyper-competitiveness and intensive cultivation" that are employed to ensure that their students develop the necessary skills and networks to gain entrance to universities and by implication, to the economic benefits of the labour market (p. 182). Students in elite schools are encouraged to join activities that are provided by the school's partnerships in order to "build their own global and regional networks consisting of people who are like them in social class terms even if they differ according to nation, culture and religion." (Kenway & Fahey, 2014, p. 190) These social networks are encouraged in order for students to develop a "travelling imagination" that encourages international mobility and the related knowledge that is gained through students engaging with a broader perspective of the world (Kenway & Fahey, 2014, p. 192).

Beyond the social network opportunities offered by elite schools, what appears to accompany an elite school education is a distinctive disposition of privilege - what Koh and Kenway (2012) refer to as students learning a certain "eloquence and poise" (Koh & Kenway, 2012, p. 333). Similarly, Forbes and Lingard (2013) in their study on the (re)production of privilege in an elite school for girls in Scotland, highlight a distinctive demeanour that they describe as "an affect, or capacity to act of 'assured optimism'" which leads to the (re)production of "physical-corporeal, social and intellectual surety, accomplishment and agency for students" (pp. 50-51). Khan (2011) in his book, *Privilege: The Making of an Adolescent Elite at St. Paul's School*, refers to a phenomenon he describes as an "ease of privilege" that is seemingly embodied within

the school's most successful students (p. 77). According to Khan (2011), it is this "embodied ease" (p. 121) that allows students from elite schools to feel comfortable in diverse social situations, preparing them for leadership in future positions of power by not only teaching them how to dress or what to wear for example, but "also disciplining one's body into how to wear it" (Khan, 2011, p. 121).

Hobden and Hobden (2015) conducted a study that tracked the progress of former South African bursary and scholarship students, and recipients of similar forms of school-level educational interventions<sup>6</sup>, for two to three years post-school. The aim of their research was to investigate the students' trajectories into their higher education studies and the world of work. The authors' findings show that despite some of their participants facing financial barriers post-school, there were significant "legacy benefits" of the school-level intervention (Hobden & Hobden, 2015, p. 8). These benefits included "sound preparation for life and academic studies" (p.1) and obtaining the "resources necessary for affiliation into university and the grit and resilience needed to persevere in the face of obstacles such as the lack of financial support [and developing] confidence and self-esteem to cope in more privileged environments" (Hobden & Hobden, 2015, p. 8).

In the following section the article presents the methodological process followed by the research study.

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<sup>6</sup> By 'school-level educational intervention' the authors refer to scholarships that enable historically disadvantaged black learners to access historically well-resourced schools, such as those included in this study.

## **Research Design**

The study makes use of a qualitative experience-centered narrative inquiry acquired by means of individual semi-structured interviews. The narrative inquiry research approach was used as it brings to the fore the lived experiences and accounts of the participants as a way of organizing human experience (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). As stated by Maynes, Pierce and Laslett (2008), individual narratives may or may not have similar themes or characteristics; however, the understanding of individual narratives can lead to better understandings of broader social experiences, which may lead ultimately to generalisability.

Ethical clearance for the research project was granted by the relevant higher education institute and the participants all gave formal consent for the interview data to be used. In addition, pseudonyms have been used for all the research participants, the foundations are labelled Foundations 1 and 2, and no specific schools are named to ensure confidentiality of the research process.

## **Discussion: Cultural capital in the wrong currency**

Most of the research participants grew up in areas that were designated as ‘non-white’ by the apartheid government under the Group Areas Act of 1950. Just over half of the participants were raised in black townships, three of the participants in what Jordyn referred to as “typical coloured communit[ies]”, and a further three of the participants grew up in what they describe as “predominantly Muslim” areas (Yusef). The last three interviewees lived in former whites-only areas: both Yolanda and John stayed with their respective families in a property at the back of their parents’ employers’ houses and Charity lived with her mother in a small flat in the southern suburbs of Cape Town because, being of Zambian origin, they felt “safer there” than in a township.

The participants attended a range of primary schools. Charity described her primary school as “disadvantaged” and Shannon said that she attended “a very poor school” that was “predominantly Afrikaans<sup>7</sup>-speaking even though the language of instruction was English”. She added, “In my primary school everyone was coloured and that’s how I perceived the world to be.” Thabo attended his local primary school where the language of instruction was almost exclusively in isiXhosa<sup>8</sup>. Within their primary school contexts almost all of the participants spoke about their reputation as being high academic achievers. Thabo and Jordyn described themselves as the “smartest kid” in their school, John recalled that he was “one of the top achievers”, and Kelly was in the “top five” in her grade. Natasha noted that she “excel[ed] at school” and was “just used to being awarded for everything”, while Shannon received “eleven awards at the end of my [Grade 7] year!” Bongani recalled that he has always had an “achiever mindset” – a fact that he attributes to “lov[ing] reading” when he was in primary school, and growing up in a home where there were “books and books and books on my bookshelf.”

Some of the participants also referred to their leadership and sporting skills. Bongani was the deputy head boy of his primary school, Shannon was both head girl and captain of the tennis team, Vuyo “played rugby at the highest level” in his primary school, and Jordyn and Koketso mentioned that that they were known for being a good tennis and cricket player respectively. Lebo referred to herself as “an all-rounder, you know: academics were good, sports was good, leadership was good!”

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<sup>7</sup>Afrikaans is a southern African language that evolved predominantly from Dutch during the nineteenth century under colonialism, and is one of South Africa’s 11 official languages.

<sup>8</sup> isiXhosa is an indigenous Nguni language, and like Afrikaans is also one of South Africa’s official languages.

In addition, a few of the students made reference to their language competencies, and more specifically, their proficiency in English. Kelly made a point of stating that she could always speak English well, and both John and Amanda indicated that their proficiency in English was something of which they were proud. Amanda recalled that she always regarded herself as being different: “most of the time, my family thought I was a coconut because ... I had a very fluent English tone in comparison to the rest of them [her family].”

The foundations included in the study annually receive as many as 8 000 to 10 000 applications, from which they select approximately 36 to 50 candidates to receive a full scholarship to attend an elite secondary school. The selection process takes place in stages, and includes the completion of an application form, the writing of an entrance assessment, an interview, and a camp. From start to finish the process takes four to six months, and candidates are informed whether their application for a scholarship is successful by midway through their Grade 7 year. Almost all of the interviewees made reference to just how challenging and competitive they recalled the application and selection process to be. Mandla stressed that it took him “days ... days!” to fill out the application forms, and Charity remembered that the hall in which they wrote the entrance exam was “jam-packed” with Grade 7s who were “probably more clever than me”. Kelly recalled that the assessments were “just horrible ... I don’t know why they do that to kids!” Shannon noted that “in primary school you don’t write longer than an hour and we had three hours of writing!” In the interview stage of the process, Mandla related that he felt “overwhelmed ... by how foreign everything was ... I didn’t even know what an interview was!” However, once the students heard that they had been chosen as scholarship recipients, they felt affirmed that they were, indeed,

exceptional. Koketso declared: “Apparently there were thousands that applied, and only eight of us were selected!”

Many of the participants verbalised feeling a sense of relief upon realising just how extensive the scholarship’s financial support was:

They were going to pay for everything! They were going to pay for tuition, they were going to pay for your boarding fees, and they were going to pay for stationery and books, [and] sports equipment. *And* we were given an allowance every month as well, so definitely you were sorted in terms of financial resources. They even gave us bedding. (Koketso)

This assuredness was echoed by Jamaal:

I came home with this big, big bag and I looked at it - a suitcase size - and this is all the clothing and things you need to be at [School A]. And I’m like, “What! I just know grey pants and a white shirt!” But now I had full summer uniform, full winter uniform, the official [School A] towel, the official [School A] tracksuit, the official [School A] swimming gear, training gear. I felt like a prince! It was surreal ... I had a suitcase of school clothes!

However, despite feeling ready for the new school environment Jordyn described feeling overwhelmed on arrival at her new school, stating that it was like “I was in a movie, ‘cos it’s such a beautiful school. It was honestly so stunning.” Likewise, Yolanda recalled:

I remember going into the school and they had all these white walls. All the girls were in neat dresses and sitting on the lawn and I was like, ‘Oh my God! This is like another world. Wow!’ ... It looked ... perfect. ... It was a complete culture shock for me and I struggled at the beginning, adjusting to that.

Part of the culture shock experienced by Cebisa was in relation to the expected academic standards: “Most definitely I was not used to the idea of getting less than 80s! ... It’s a different playground, and *everyone* [else] is on a different level of understanding and learning.” After noting that he enjoyed near celebrity status in his primary school for being a “top student”, Mandla described his first two terms of high school as “an absolute disaster”, stating that academically he “struggled ... struggled!” Similarly, Jamaal experienced a significant drop in his results: “I went from 80s, 90s in Grade 7, to 40s and 50s in Grade 8.” Charity found the difference she experienced between herself and the other students especially challenging:

The other kids were smarter and were ready, coming from good primary schools. So in terms of being intimidated ... I think I took a step back because I felt that ... not that I didn’t think that I deserved being there ... but I could tell there was a difference.

In addition, Charity quickly realised that what she had come to accept as a “basic, normal education” up to that point in her life, was inadequate when compared to the standard to which most of her peers were accustomed.

Another difference highlighted by the interviewees related to language. As shown by McKinney’s (2017) research, English, and more particularly ‘standard’ English, is the dominant language ideology in many South African schools. This is a notion that she refers to as Anglonormativity, whereby schools still largely operate as if there is one language which should be used in the same way. In relation to aspects of Anglonormativity as outlined by McKinney (2017), Thabo described the following experience in one of his first classes:

The first day we had to say something and I said something, but they couldn't understand what I was saying because my English at that time was not very good. So the teacher asked me where I went to school, and [then] she was like, 'Oh, where is that?' Then I told them that I was from [a township on the outskirts of Cape Town] and I remember the room was silent, and then they laughed.

Jordyn reported feeling self-conscious about her accent, "as people just spoke so differently, so eloquently" in her new school. And Natasha recalled feeling "deeply uncomfortable" about the way she spoke: "... even the coloured [School B] girls would speak properly ... speak similar to the white [School B] girls." For Koketso, it wasn't so much his accent as his choice of words that assumed a level of significance in his elite school: "vocabulary was very important, even for just minor things ... [and if you] made mistakes and things like that, you will stand out ... they will always pick you out." Thabo, Jordyn, Natasha and Koketso all expressed their realisation that how they spoke English was not regarded as the 'correct' way to speak in this new environment, and therefore they felt that they needed to change in order to fit in.

Discussing aspects of the implicit expectations, Yusef identified one of the differences he experienced as the way he was expected to behave at his new school: "I went to a Muslim [primary] school, and so the whole system was different ... the way you greet teachers in the morning was different." Lebo recalled finding "cultural differences" difficult to get used to, such as calling her (white) friends' mothers by their first name: "No, I can't call you that. ... I have to call you 'mom-something', not just call you by your name!" Khanyiswa encountered a difference with regards to food:

This one time my friend brought samp<sup>9</sup> to school. And the other girls were like, ‘Oh my word. What is that?’ I was like, ‘It’s samp.’ But at the same time I just felt like, ‘What’s wrong with samp ... I mean, you bring pesto! The first time I heard about pesto was in high school. I was ... what is this? This green thing in pasta?’ Why would you ...? And then on top of it, you put it on bread! But then ... me bringing samp was a weird thing? So then I had to bring sandwiches ... I had to.

In addition, the participants described realising that they felt that their (privileged) peers seemed to know instinctively how to conduct themselves in the elite school field:

The foreignness hit me hard because, obviously, it was an experience that I’ve never had. A lot of it comes with assumptions - assumptions you know that, you can do this, you can do that. And having come from ... as I did, from my background, I didn’t know half of what was going on. I was confused half the time. And so on the very first day I thought, ‘No, I want to go home!’ (Mandla)

I can’t really put my fingers on something specific, but it’s just the fact that [I was now with] a group of people that all acted in the same way. Like, I came from a primary school that everyone acted in the same way and I was the same as that. And I could relate to everyone on some level .... But then going into high school where there was a group of people that had so much in common, but superficially they were nothing like me, you know. (Shannon)

Everyone seems to know everything, and they seem to know how to go around things. Or they think about things differently - they have different views ... you

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<sup>9</sup> Samp is a traditional African food item consisting of crushed maize.

could see some people are privileged. And you could see the advantages that they have over you. ... What else do they know that I don't? (Charity)

Directly related to a sense of not knowing, the students' accounts reveal strong feelings of discomfort and of not belonging. Shannon stated that, "I didn't fit any of their requirements, I sounded different and looked nothing like them". Thabo described feeling "quite intimidate[ed] because I felt like I didn't fit". Jamaal summed up his experiences as follows:

Sometime in the first two months, it sort of hits you ... my lunch looks a bit different to these [bl]okes. The money we have for the tuck-shop is different. If I want to play sports, my equipment looks a bit different to theirs ... You know what I mean? And then it starts to hit you – hey, I don't actually belong here!

Given their initial feelings of elation when they were chosen out of thousands of applicants to be awarded a scholarship, as Jamaal related the scholarship students quickly came to realise that the provision of their scholarship did not in fact equate to feelings of 'equal access' within the elite school context. In other words, the scholarship students came to realise that the cultural resources (high-status cultural capital) that their peers had accumulated from their homes, communities and previous schooling endeavours was the form and volume of capital that was valued by, or regarded as legitimate and authentic, within the elite school field.

For Bourdieu, forms of capital refer to "any resource effective in a given social arena that enables one to appropriate the specific profits arising out of participation and contest in it." (Wacquant, 1998, p. 268) Put more simply, capital refers to what is valued in a social space. Bourdieu (1986) distinguishes between three different forms of capital, namely economic, social and cultural capital. Economic capital refers to

financial wealth or the command over financial assets, while social capital refers to a network of social relations or connections of a group or an individual. Cultural capital, as a form of symbolic capital, exists in three forms: in the embodied state it refers to the “long-lasting dispositions of the mind and the body” such as style and taste, aptitude and familiarity with highbrow culture and use of formal language; in the objectified state it refers to material possessions such as the choice of artwork displayed on a wall; and in the institutionalised state it refers to credentials, qualifications, education and knowledge (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 17).

Bourdieu (1985) argues that an individual’s power within a field is determined by their position in the field and by the amount and type of capital they possess. He further states that schools are based on the cultural and linguistic capital of the middle class (Bourdieu, 1977a). As such the middle class have ‘crude’ privileges in their educational endeavours in the form of cultural capital from their homes and communities: “a good word put in, the right contacts, help with studies, extra teaching, information on the educational system and job outlets.” (Bourdieu, 1976, p. 110) Therefore, for the middle class, their “*social gift*” of cultural capital appears to be a “*natural gift*” of aptitude and knowledge (Bourdieu, 1976, p. 110, italics in original). This is especially evident in the elite school field where the ethos, knowledge, attitudes and dispositions of the middle and upper classes are particularly dominant.

Bourdieu (1977b) further asserts that schooling, as one of the most important sites for social reproduction, is also a key space “which imposes the legitimate forms of discourse and the idea that discourse should be recognized if and only if it conforms to the legitimate norms.” (p. 650) This is what Bourdieu (1992) refers to as symbolic violence which he defines as “the violence which is exercised upon a social agent with his or her complicity” (p. 167). In other words, people are “subjected to forms of

violence (treated as inferior, denied resources, limited in their social mobility and aspirations), but they do not perceive it that way; rather, their situation seems to them to be ‘the natural order of things’.” (Webb et al., 2002, p. 25) In relation to the elite school environment, the cultural capital of the bourgeois culture operates “under the cloak of individual talent and academic meritocracy” (Wacquant, 1998, p. 216). As such, individuals whose cultural capital matches the requirements of a social field,

move in their world as fish in water, ... they need not engage in rational computation in order to reach the goals that best suit their interests. All they have to do is to follow their dispositions which, being adjusted to their positions, ‘naturally’ generate practices adjusted to the situation. (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 108)

In contrast, students within an educational setting whose dispositional ways of being have been structured differently, such as the scholarship students in the study who described themselves as coming from working class backgrounds, tend to perceive the practices of the elite as ‘naturally’ distinguished, specifically in relation to their own feelings of unease or disquiet in the same social setting. Thus, the converse of feeling like a ‘fish in water’ is captured well by Charity when she stated, “everyone seems to know everything and they seem to know how to go around things”.

Despite Bourdieu’s (1986) forms of capital being mostly symbolic, he does state that economic capital can involve both the access to financial means as well the potential to ‘buy’ prestige, power and positioning within a social field. Thus, the awarding of scholarships to students, as a form of economic capital, can be seen as a benefaction that enables students to access quality schooling experiences. However, as the data from the student interviews highlights, the scholarship recipients were unaware of the social hierarchy (Wacquant, 1998) of the elite school field, and thus anticipated

feeling a sense of belonging in the new environment. They felt that they had acquired the requisite cultural capital from their homes, communities and schools to be successful in their school endeavours and, due to the financial endowment provided by the scholarship, they had access to the same facilities, resources, and opportunities as their peers. But as Bourdieu (1985) states:

The social field can be described as a multi-dimensional space of positions ... [and] agents are distributed within it, in the first dimension, according to the overall volume of the capital they possess and, in the second dimension, according to the composition of their capital. (p. 724)

What Bourdieu is reminding us of here is that the volume and form of capital that is valued by social fields, might differ. Mills and Gale (2010), referencing Vincent and Martin (2002), state: “[e]veryone possesses cultural capital, but in itself it is arbitrary, with value being ascribed to particular forms (and not others) within particular fields” (p. 67). Thus, despite the scholarship students feeling that they had the academic acumen and right attitude to continue to be high achievers in their new secondary school contexts, Bourdieu’s (1973, 1976) writing on cultural capital indicates that an individual’s strengths and achievements are not always transferable in the same measure to another part of the field. Therefore, although the participants in the study occupied a position of relative power and position in their primary school due to the volume and form of their cultural capital matching, and at times exceeding, the requirements of their school field, these same forms of capital, as they were to discover, were not necessarily acknowledged or valued to the same extent in the field of elite schooling.

The findings of this research study suggest, therefore, that the awarding of a scholarship should be carefully considered in terms of both the structural and the

existential elements involved in the process. While it is accepted that the accounts of the students as presented in the data of this research cannot be generalised, it is nonetheless apparent that there are deep complexities and inequalities involved in a process that aims to equalise the education opportunities for students via the scholarship programmes offered by various foundations. As noted by Bourdieu (1985), transitioning from one part of a social field to another is not always straightforward, and this study shows that providing students with financial means to access elite education does not mean that they enter as 'equal players'.

### **Concluding reflections**

One of the key questions that arises from a study of this nature is whether the scholarship recipients, knowing what they know now, would make the same educational choices again. Although all of the participants in this study regarded their opportunity to attend an elite school as placing them in an advantageous position in terms of their tertiary studies and future work prospects, their responses to a question that asked if they would wish their own child to be presented with a similar opportunity, varied.

Khanyiswa, in considering whether or not she would one day be prepared to send her own daughter to the same secondary school that she attended, initially referred to herself as "a survivor", but one who "still has scars ... [as] in high school you were assimilating to white girls, you were assimilating to 'that thing', and it was very violent." In the next breath, she stated that, "at the same time I didn't really survive, because I felt like I had to conform. I recognize it now."

Looking back, Thabo made reference to the "struggles" that he feels he faced at school for "being different":

Me being a scholarship kid made people look at me in a different way. It's not like you can afford to be at the school. They will like, 'Okay, you're poor, and because of the scholarship, that's why you are here.' ... I remember looking at it when I was in class, and people will be seen as, 'They are so-and-so's daughter' and 'So-and-so's son.' And when they came to me, they will be like, 'Oh, this is the scholarship kid.'

At the time of writing this article, three years after the interviews were conducted, both Khanyiswa and Thabo have graduated with an Honours degree from a South African university. Jamal, on the other hand, left university in his first year and described himself as "the one that sort of went astray in their terms." Having said this, Jamal blames himself and not the school nor the foundation for what he describes as his "shortcomings":

The blueprint was set out for me so I can't go back to them and say, 'Why did you want me to go study?' The blueprint was there from day one. The vision was there from day one. So I am the one that ditched the blueprint. ... There's a long list of things that I'm grateful to [School A] for, and I'll still endorse [School A] as the best school in the country - because of the way I was able to grow myself. ... That's what I feel the less privileged schools, they lack. Because they're just: 'That's your syllabus, do your syllabus, go home.'

Though having said this, Jamal added that if given the opportunity to return to either the donor foundation or his school, he would like to say the following: "I would tell them that there needs to be support services for people like me. There needs to be. Yes, you can make the books look good and show good records, but life happens."

For other participants, the 'unintended consequences' of accepting the scholarship were described in a more positive, albeit still slightly hesitant, manner:

I feel like being in an ordinary public school I wouldn't have ... grown to accept myself because I would have been like, okay - just getting by. I wouldn't have to have had that huge struggle for all these years to kind of understand and be grateful about my past, my background and my family, and all of that. So I wouldn't have learned all of that ... if I had gone to an ordinary school ... and that's huge for me. It's definitely huge for me. (Yolanda)

Whereas for some like Natasha and Mandla, however, there was an unreserved recognition that the scholarship changed the course of their lives fundamentally and in a positive manner:

If I didn't get the scholarship, I don't know where I would be right now. ... I don't know if I would have gone to high school. (Natasha)

Those [Foundation 1] forms changed the direction of my life. Now, imagine my life trajectory, I don't know. ... My horizons, as a result of [the Foundation 1 scholarship], got so much bigger. I saw so much more in myself than what I could actually ever. (Mandla)

Jordyn also recognized that her life might have turned out very differently if it hadn't been for the scholarship:

Because the scholarship definitely made me feel ... not that I needed to prove myself, but I needed to work hard for them, and I needed to kind of uphold that. They saw something in me, so there must be, you know? It must mean something. [I] could have easily turned in the wrong direction. I could have rebelled against my family, my parents. But I never once felt that way, you know. I always felt like I had a responsibility to do well still.

Given all of this, what is evident is that the notion of a scholarship is far more complex and ‘messier’ than perhaps the donors and schools envisage, and certainly more so than what was initially anticipated by the scholarship recipients themselves. Undoubtedly there are both costs and benefits that accompany the acceptance of a scholarship and, as stated in the introduction of this article, the economic endowment provided by the foundations did not necessarily equate to equal access for the recipients.

The findings of the study thus suggest that there is scope for donor foundations and schools carefully to consider what the acceptance of a scholarship entails for students entering elite education from schools in disadvantaged communities. In terms of the deep structural inequalities between schools, transitioning from one part of the field of education to another is not straightforward. Providing students with financial means does not mean that they enter elite schools as ‘equal players’. In effect, what the scholarship recipients’ accounts show is, that upon entering the elite school field, they possessed “cultural capital in the wrong currency” (Gewirtz et al., 1995, p. 40). Without approaching the issues scholarship students face in deficit terms, it could be to the schools’ (as well as the students’) advantage to recognize the extent to which adjustments are borne by scholarship recipients, and to explore ways in which schools and foundations may be reflective about the adjustments scholarship students feel are required of them.

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