
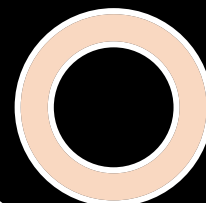




Polishing rough diamonds
against the grain: social
mobility through an
independent school in
South Africa

Adam Cooper
Human Sciences
Research Council

Rough Diamonds South Africa (RDSA)

- A small independent school started in 2002, one of six schools, worldwide
- Approximately 60 learners per grade(R-12)
- Children from poorest homes given high quality education in small classes, social supports from social workers, nurses and counsellors, two meals and two snacks daily and career advice and support for tertiary education for five years after completing secondary school.
- Residential assessment sessions: only households with less than R2500 income per month accepted



An almost
fictitious case
study:

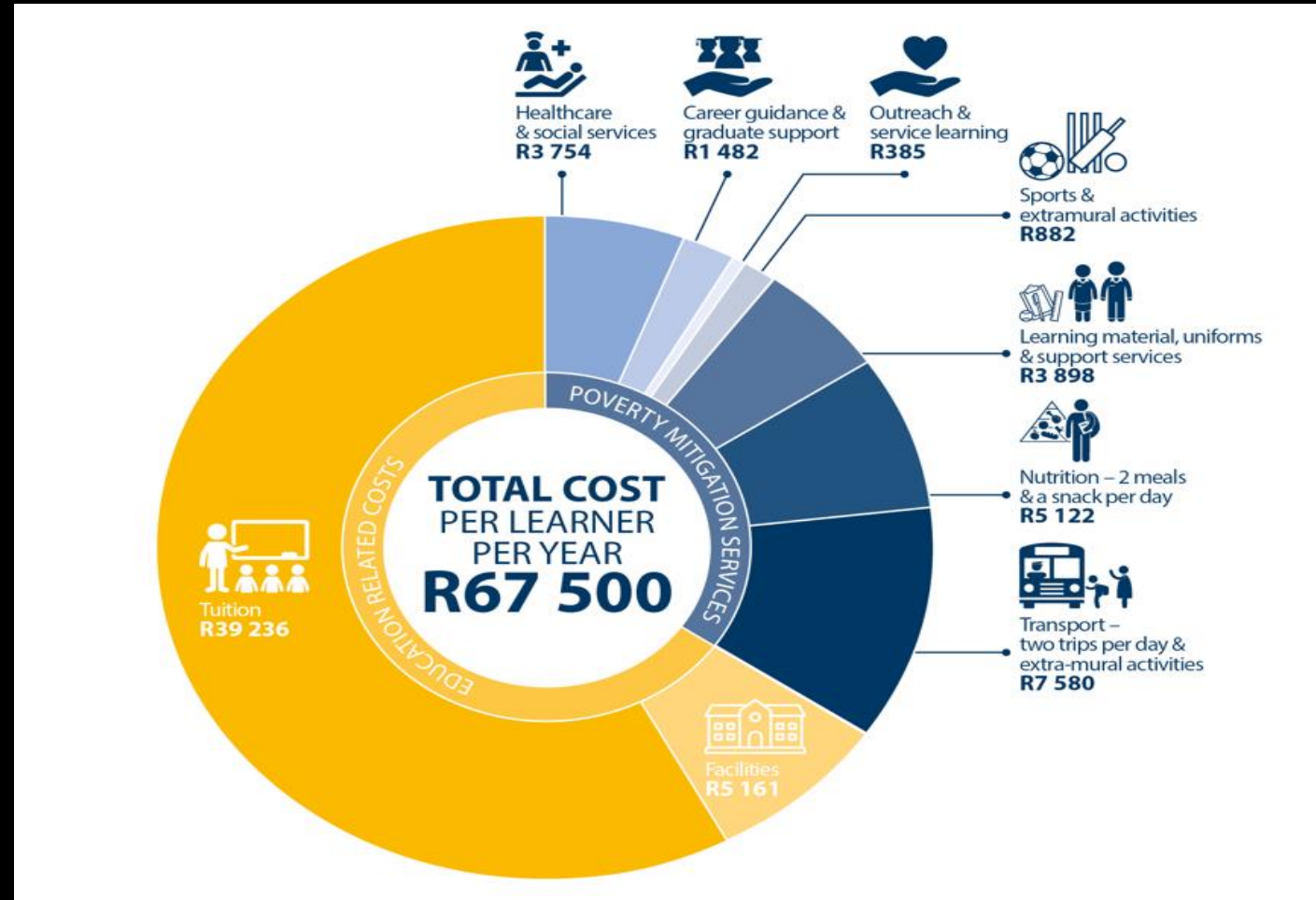
- When marginalized children from the poorest homes in one of the world's most unequal cities is given excellent education in small classes, health and social supports, free tertiary and career guidance, how high might they climb?



Cost comparison

RDSA:

- Ordinary public schools cost on average between R14000 and R16000 per year, including revenue from subsidies and fees (DG Murray Trust, 2017).
- RDSA therefore costs four and a half to five times the amount of ordinary public schools.



The HSRC evaluation

(1) a quantitative analysis of the school's academic results,

(2) documenting classroom teaching and learning practices through observations and interviews with educators, and

(3) a survey (n=109) and in-depth interviews (n=12) with former learners.

The focus here is on (3), providing a case study of social mobility through a particular educational intervention. The school's academic results are also touched on, as these had implications for social mobility.

Social mobility


- Movement in the structure of the division of labour, either in class terms, or changes in occupational positions (Erikson and Goldthorpe 1992).
- Underpinned by ideas about meritocracy and development: education systems arm talented members of future generations with skills to improve society, regardless of their social origins (Marshall, Swift and Robert 1997; Erikson and Goldthorpe 1993).
- Hypothesis of ‘increasing merit selections’ (IMS): education creates social mobility for talented people, benefitting society through the skills of gifted individuals advancing the common good (Brown 2013).
- Ideas about “meritocracy” largely ignore social, political and economic contexts: Opportunities for employment, socially constructed labour markets and other structural conditions are largely overlooked.

- Did RDSA alumni achieve social mobility?

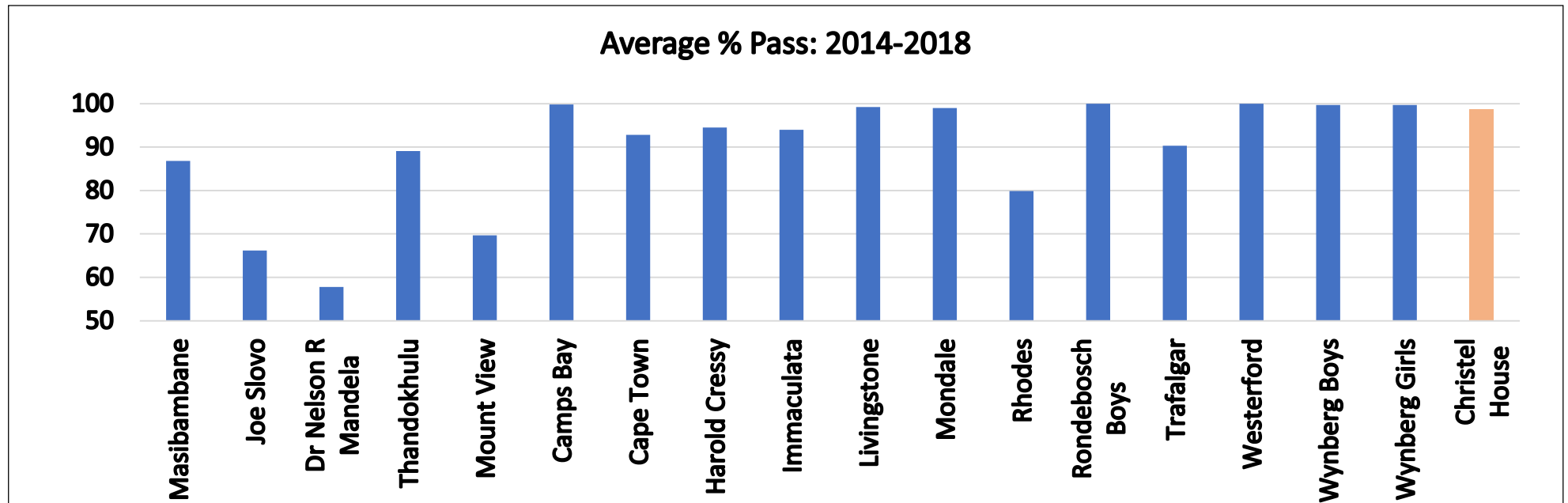
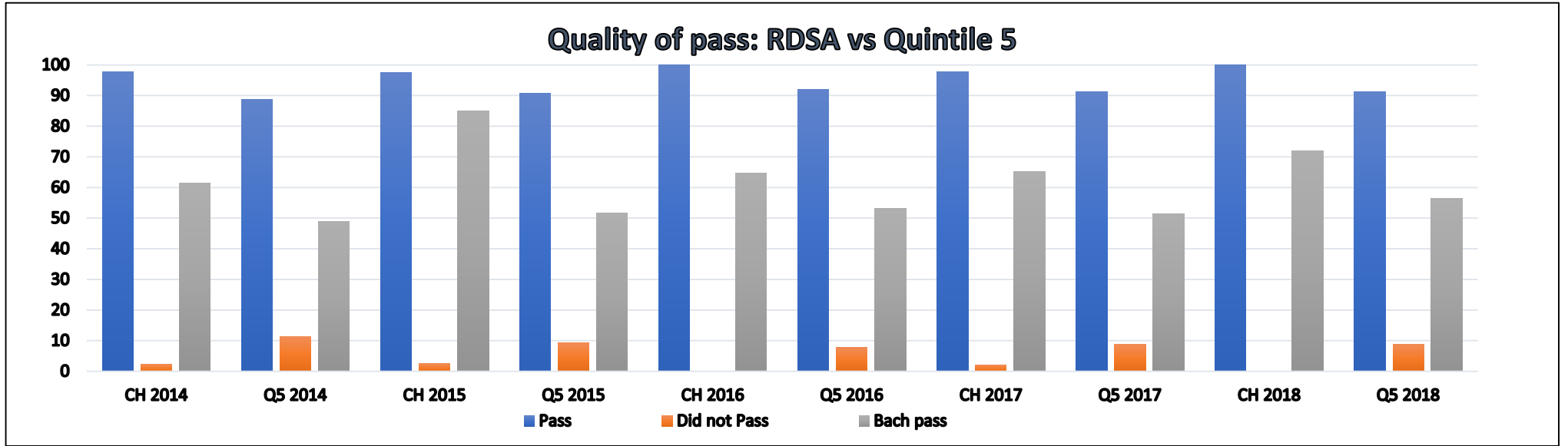




Academic results, survey and in-depth interviews

- Analysis of academic results: compared to quintile averages and spectrum of schools
 - Survey: between 2009 and 2019, 412 grade 12s graduated from RDSA: 109 participated.
 - Questions included past and present residential neighbourhoods, highest educational qualifications, employment histories and income.
 - 12 in-depth interviews with former learners who appeared, from the survey, to attain upward social mobility, measured, crudely, by self-reported income and type of employment.
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Academic results

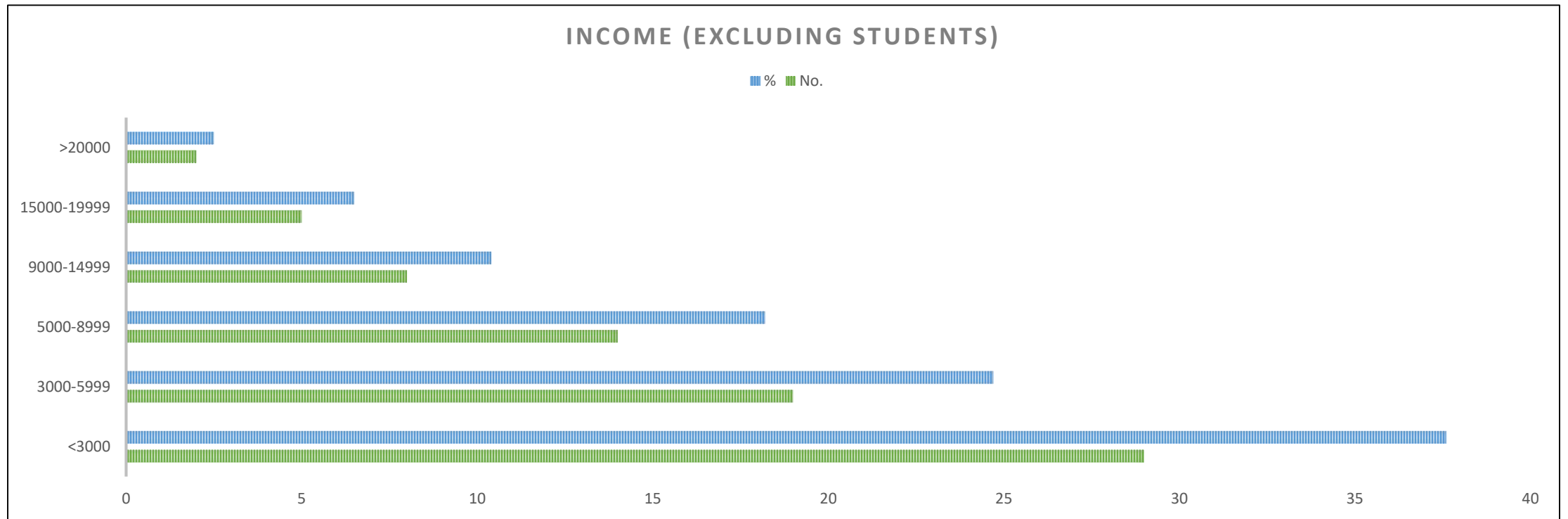


Survey results...

Unemployment rate for RDSA graduates across 10 cohorts of grade 12's: 20% (35% studying and 45% employed).

The school's College and Careers (C and C) department data indicated that over the four years prior to the survey, between 5 and 10% were unemployed

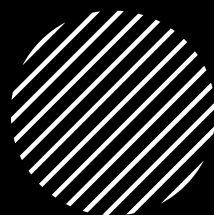
Far lower than national averages, which were estimated at 74% using the expanded definition in 2021 (Stoddard 2021).



- 37% of respondents earned less than R3000 per month, a quarter of the sample earned between 3000 and 6000 rand per month, 18% earned between 6000 and 9000 rand per month and 20% earned more than R9000.
- Excluding students, RDSA alumni's median income was therefore R3000-6000. Using the middle point of each salary band (ie. R4500 for R3000-R5999 and R7000 for R5000-R8999) the average income was R5850.



Educational attainment



- 69% of young people who enter RDSA in grade one successfully complete and pass high school and 43% of those who do grade 12 enter tertiary education.
- This is far higher than their parents: the 2016 Community Survey found that 48% of adults in this city had completed grade 12 (COGTA 2020).
- Further educational attainment: in the Western Cape 7% of youth aged 20-24 have any tertiary education (Statistics SA, 2016), while 43.8% of RDSA graduates had completed more than grade 12.

Did RDSA alumni achieve social mobility?



Academic results and survey data indicate some social mobility had been attained....



But....




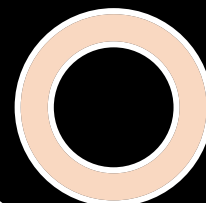
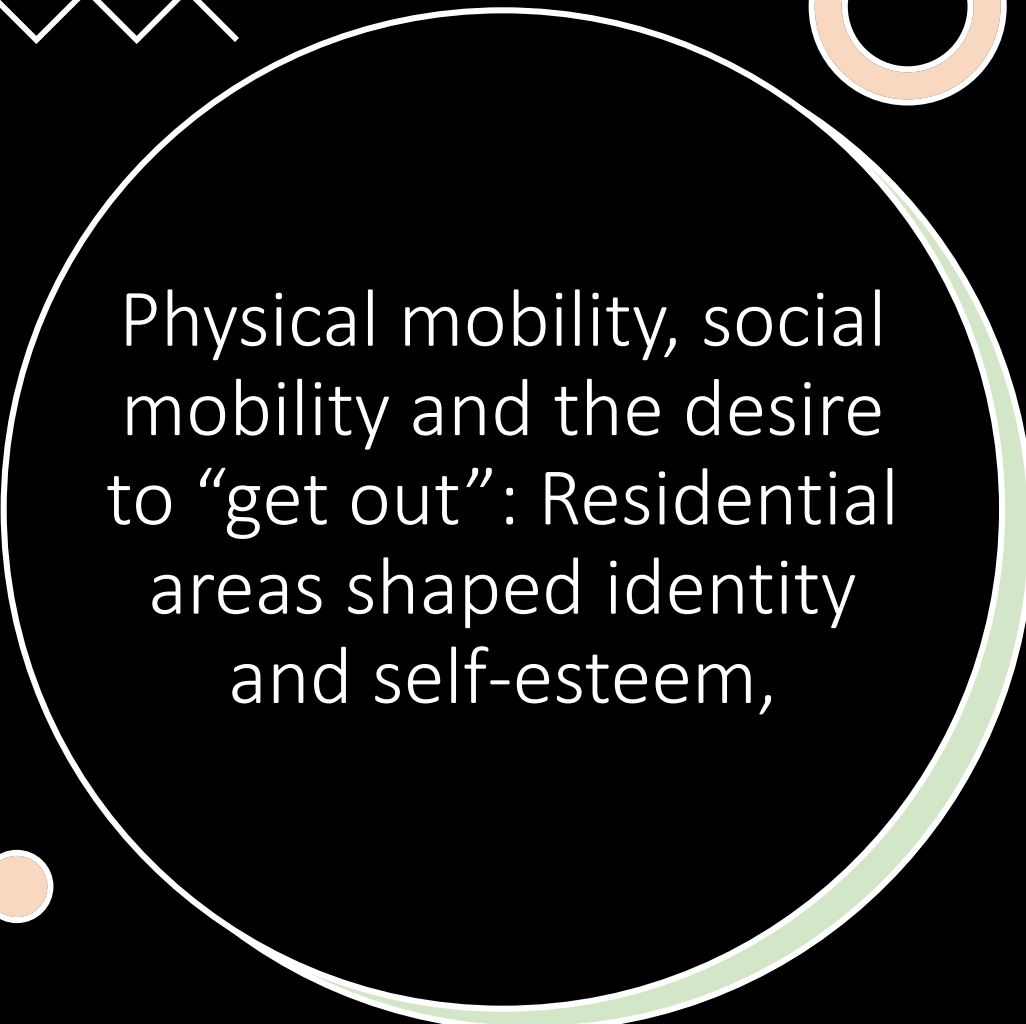

The qualitative research combined with the survey challenges this...

Subjective indications of social mobility: Qualitative research with successful alumni

Social mobility as physical mobility

- *My first goal is to get out of the environment...get my family out.*
- *We had this mentorship or guardianship program, teachers basically took us under their wing. We used to sleep over and that also took your mind out. All the negativity that goes on within your community...and also the socio- economic status... I come from a poor family. We have 15 that used to stay in one house.*

Time at teachers' homes gave these young people mentorship and role-models, as well as emotional and material support, a taste of life outside of the townships with hopes to make that permanent .



Physical mobility, social mobility and the desire to “get out”: Residential areas shaped identity and self-esteem,

The environments and places that we come from, we almost feel like we not good enough. Which kind of got triggered during that interview


The way I saw the world previously, was I've come from X township and no one's ever going to listen to me. I'm a girl child from the township people are always going to stereotype me, no one is going to listen...

Stereotypes and prejudices linked to neighbourhoods;
Insecurities and lack of confidence





Social mobility

- Upward social mobility bound up in aspirations for physical mobility and exiting township life.
 - However, the survey revealed that only 24 out of the 109 alumni had moved out of the neighbourhood in which they grew up.
 - Of those 24, five were unemployed, 2 worked at RDSA and three were students. Of the other 14, there was a teacher, an online English teacher and a school counsellor, two call centre agents, three administrators, a soldier, a pharmacist, an NGO trainer, two ran their own businesses and one was a candidate attorney.
 - Only one of the participants indicated moving to a historically white suburb.
 - Combining residential neighbourhood information with occupations therefore gave deeper insights into social mobility.
 - Despite indications that RDSA had improved these young people's educational attainment and income generation in comparison to parents, qualitative research indicated that social mobility is closely connected to physical mobility. When combined with survey data, few appeared to have attained radical social mobility.
 - Social mobility slow and incremental
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*Reasons for
limits to social
mobility #1:
social capital,
first jobs and
moving up*

“With the first job, the CEO of RDSA knew the lady who was a CEO. So luckily, at that time, when I just left University, they were looking for an office administrator... So that's how I got the opportunity for the interview. And then I got a second one, also via RDSA...”

- Despite having a desirable Bachelor of Commerce university degree, this alumnus struggled to secure a first job as an administrator and was fortunate to have RDSA support her in this endeavour.

- *Some of our teachers have relatives, or friends who are in different fields and industries...you can always ask one of them and they know someone...*

Despite RDSA teachers doing their best to introduce learners to various fields, their networks were not as powerful as those linked to elite schools in the city

Reasons for limits to social mobility #2: Structure of SA economy

Some mobility through foot in door of service sector economy: retail stores and call centres

- *I started putting in my CVs and I didn't get replies... I wouldn't back down. Every day I'd come with a different angle. They tell me "okay, no, you don't have a communication experience"... "hey, look, this is what I got for English in matric, I definitely can communicate". "Oh, you don't have enough experience". "Hey, you know, here's my reference data. I worked at my aunt's tavern"... the manager was just like... "just give her t shirts" (to wear as an employee).*
- *You know... I told myself when I started this is not where I don't want to take calls every single day...day in day out. But I also taught myself in order for me to get to the training position I needed to be the best call taking person agent in the in the call centre so that I can get noticed and that's exactly what I did.*

Alumni that achieved social mobility used resources like English language skills as an initial foothold into the service sector labour market; onward trajectory into more lucrative positions.

Able to endure strict disciplinary regimes that operate in these institutions and use their experience for upward social mobility

Social mobility revisited

Did an education at RDSA catalyse social mobility for the young people lucky enough to attend this school?

- “yes” using crude indicators- how much education and income a person has in comparison to their parents.
- But...disappointment amongst some RDSA staff and students in terms of the school’s “return on investment”: RDSA costs nearly five times more than ordinary public schools.
- One medical student, a candidate attorney, a teacher and a small number of other professionals, according to the 109 graduates that participated in the survey.
- The survey indicated that few alumni had in fact managed to move out of the areas where they were raised.
- The miracle some had hoped, investing heavily in the poorest children from the most marginalised neighbourhoods, to turn them into doctors, lawyers and captains of industry, had not (yet) materialised.

Structural factors that limit social mobility

- Historically forged structure of South African economy, inhibits social mobility- entry-level service sector jobs one of few routes upwards.
- Lopsided economy- large firms dominate each sector, very little employment-intensive growth or SMMEs (Reddy et al 2016; Philip 2018). Unlike other parts of the global South: relatively small informal economy
- Education has become “deracialised”- a market where cultural traits and access to powerful networks are bought and sold- but it is not delinked from whiteness and historically white institutions (Hunter, 2019)
- RDSA: language skills and quality education but far from elite networks and no white teachers

Social mobility revisited

- Dominant social mobility approach measures educational returns, average monetary gains generated by additional years of schooling
- Ignores social structure bound up in both education systems and labour markets/livelihoods, factors that mediate returns.
- RDSA: even if marginalized children armed with resources that wealthy children receive, the gains are important but small
- Unless accompanied by efforts for systemic transformation-economic structures and social networks who benefit from it, attending to race and class divisions, using education to improve society will largely be in vain.
- Rather than education= “black box” that increases earnings, education *both* a mechanism for developing cognitive and social capabilities *and* acquired or purchased in order to aspire for and reproduce privilege.