

Cracks in the Trophy Cabinet: Confronting Inequity in a Historically Segregated School

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journals.sagepub.com/home/jel**Melanie Drake** 

Abstract

This case explores the leadership journey of a new principal, Miss Joel, in a historically segregated South African primary school. Navigating systemic inequities and diverse stakeholder expectations, Miss Joel leverages community engagement and crisis response to drive transformation. The case highlights tensions between tradition and inclusion, the challenges of confronting long-standing biases, and the opportunities for growth through transformative leadership. This case invites global educational leaders to explore equity, inclusion, and adaptive leadership strategies within complex historical legacies.

Keywords

educational leadership, leadership transformation, historically segregated schools

Introduction

South Africa's education system bears the indelible marks of a history steeped in segregation and division. Even three decades after the abolishment of Apartheid, the lingering impact of these historical legacies remains. Within these spaces of historical inequality and unaddressed grievances, a Constitution and Bill of Rights guarantees access to education to students of all ethnicities since the 1990s.

In a small South African town, nestled within the context of this complex history, a diverse public primary school—a “white-only” school prior to 1990—welcomes a

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new principal, Miss Joel. Tasked with leading the school into a new era of modernization and inclusion while preserving its traditional commitment to excellence and achievement, the principal faces high expectations. The school's hallowed halls display honors boards, trophies, and plaques reporting decades of accomplishment; a legacy cherished by the school community, particularly its alumni who entrust their own children to uphold this tradition of excellence.

Miss Joel's personal connection to the school, rooted in her experience as a white student during its transition in the 1990s, uniquely positions her to navigate its ongoing evolution. As an alumna, she roamed the same hallways during her formative years. At age 11, she joined the "welcome team" for the first students of color—a pivotal moment in South African education.

Transitioning from student to educator, Miss Joel joined the teaching staff fresh out of university. After 6 years in the classroom, she embarked on postgraduate studies, immersing herself in the challenging educational landscape of post-apartheid South Africa. This changed her in many ways, but she couldn't have predicted how much these experiences would bear weight on this new chapter in her life.

Miss Joel returns to the school as principal and faces a unique set of challenges. The decision by the Department of Education (the government administration which oversees public schools in South Africa) and the School Governing Body (composed of elected school parent representatives) to bypass internal promotion raised eyebrows. Her relatively young age and departure from the traditional trajectory, where teachers ascend over several years from department heads to deputy principals, and finally to principal, stirred quiet discontent among some school staff members.

The backdrop of historical segregation and shifting societal expectations creates a complex context for Miss Joel, who must navigate both her personal history with the school and the evolving needs of its diverse community. The challenges she faces begin with understanding the broader school context, which is heavily influenced by historical biases, and extend into managing the diverse expectations of stakeholders—including staff, parents, alumni, and the state—each with their own vision for the future of the school.

School Context

The teaching staff at this small-town primary school reflects the institution's historical bias, with the majority of long-standing teachers being white, in line with the school's pre-1990s status as a "whites-only" institution. Today, the student body is predominantly composed of students of color, with around 60% coming from Black African, Colored,¹ and Indian communities, marking a significant shift in demographic representation. This diversity is further complicated by the range of family backgrounds represented within the student cohort. Some families come from affluent backgrounds, while others face significant socioeconomic challenges, adding complexity to the school community. Post-apartheid reforms allowed schools to adopt fee-paying models, which many formerly "white-only" schools chose to implement. This system has led to a School Governing Body composed of highly professional parents, including

chartered accountants, lawyers, and business owners, whose involvement in governance is meticulous. The diversity of family backgrounds manifests in the everyday experiences of students, with some families making significant sacrifices—prioritizing education above other financial commitments—to send their children to a school they believe offers exceptional educational opportunities.

The Complexity of the New Principal: Case Narrative

Miss Joel's appointment broke the traditional leadership path for the school. Her selection over internal candidates, particularly seasoned staff members, sparked significant skepticism among teachers and parents. In addition, as a white principal in a school with a predominantly non-white student body, Miss Joel faced scrutiny, particularly from non-white parents, who expected her to reconcile historical inequities while guiding the school toward an inclusive future.

The media celebrated her arrival, calling her a “transformational leader,” a “change agent,” and a “pioneer.” Expectations were high before she even began her role. Miss Joel's tenure was under careful observation from all school community members. Though she had her own goals for the school, she became aware of the distinct and often conflicting expectations of the various stakeholders.

School Governor Expectations

While South African public schools fall under the administration of the government, the organizational structure adheres to a broadly “self-managing” philosophy, with schools overseen by School Governing Bodies (parent representatives). These Governing Bodies are democratically elected and serve various functions, including making final recommendations for educator appointments, particularly that of the principal.

Miss Joel gained favor with the School Governing Body interview panel due to her alignment with their vision for the school's growth. Key focus areas for the panel included modernizing facilities, updating the curriculum and pedagogy to reflect 21st-century education, and incorporating technology such as robotics, AI, and drones. They aimed to position the school as a leader in adopting cutting-edge technologies. The School Governing Body believed that achieving these goals would elevate the school's status and attract high-caliber students and families. Their expectations were clear: Miss Joel should implement these changes quickly and ensure staff embraced the new vision through professional development.

Parents and School Community

The broader parent body and school community eagerly anticipated Miss Joel's arrival. Their desire was for the school to break away from rigid traditions and embrace a more inclusive sense of belonging. Some parents, however, felt marginalized, either because their voices were not heard under the previous administration or because they felt it

was not their place to speak up, fearing the consequences of challenging the status quo. The highly professional School Governing Body parent members, while accomplished, didn't always resonate with every parent.

Miss Joel's unique perspective, coming from outside the immediate school environment, held promise for these parents. Her broader experience beyond the role of a teacher might bring inclusivity. Perhaps she could encourage more parents to engage actively rather than remaining on the periphery.

Alumni Expectations

The alumni, having once been students at the school, held specific hopes for Miss Joel's tenure. To them, it seemed only natural that she would maintain the status quo; a continuation of the strong history of success and achievement that had spanned several decades. Alumni expectations were clear: they wanted the honors boards and colonial house names untouched, viewing them as symbols of the school's heritage. After all, why alter something that had proven effective for so long?

Miss Joel was more than just a principal to the alumni; she was "one of us." Her appointment brought a collective sigh of relief, as they believed she would uphold cherished traditions, ensure continued success, and preserve the school's core values and culture. The 85-year history of accomplishment mattered deeply to them, and they predicted that Miss Joel would carry it forward seamlessly.

State Expectations

In contrast, the state (government department responsible for overseeing and administering public schools) had a singular focus: compliance. Their priority was adherence to rules, policies, and established procedures. They sought assurance that the new principal would pose no difficulties. Ideally, they would have preferred a candidate from within the existing school system, someone who had gradually risen through the ranks. However, the School Governing Body parents' persistence and thorough advocacy for Miss Joel's appointment eventually swayed the decision in their favor.

Teachers' Reactions

For those who had witnessed Miss Joel's early days as a beginner teacher, her elevation to principal was met with suspicion. They struggled to reconcile her readiness for this role, questioning whether she possessed sufficient experience. Her academic research and university lecturing background didn't directly translate to the practical challenges of school leadership, in their view. Some bold teachers even approached the School Governing Body seeking clarity: What set Miss Joel apart from other candidates? To add complexity, two senior educators who had taught for many years at the school, with extensive experience, had applied for the position themselves. They believed they had performed well during interviews and felt disheartened that the

School Governing Body had chosen an external candidate. After years of service, hard work, and sacrifices for the school, they felt undervalued and resentful.

In the background of the school context, bigger challenges, steeped in the societal complexities and grievances of South Africa and beyond, were about to impact on the leadership capability of Miss Joel.

Broader Context: #FeesMustFall and #BlackLivesMatter Movements

Access to quality education is a fundamental right in South Africa's Constitution and Bill of Rights. However, despite these protections, South Africa remains one of the most unequal societies globally (Ntombana et al., 2023), with ongoing struggles to provide affordable education for all. The #FeesMustFall and #BlackLivesMatter movements highlighted systemic inequalities, underscoring the need to address historical injustices in education, where exclusionary practices continue to disadvantage marginalized groups (Badat, 2016; Booysen, 2016). These movements were driven by frustration and a demand for transformation, especially in institutions upholding colonial symbols and practices.

For Miss Joel, a white principal in a historically "white-only" school, these movements directly shaped her leadership context. She had to navigate the heightened expectations of non-white parents and students, who demanded both accountability and tangible change toward a more democratic and inclusive environment. Her leadership journey took place in the midst of these social shifts, illustrating the complex interplay between broader societal crises and school-level leadership. As she tried to reconcile the school's historical traditions with an increasingly diverse and vocal community, Miss Joel's experience became a microcosm of South Africa's ongoing struggle for educational equity and social justice.

Crisis 1: #FeesMustFall

Protest action is common in South Africa as a response to inequality. In 2015, the #FeesMustFall movement, initially sparked by students at the University of Witwatersrand, spread to other universities, demanding free education. While focusing on rising fees, the protests highlighted deeper issues such as declining government funding, lack of social transformation, and socioeconomic and racial inequality.

Social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter played a crucial role in mobilizing students, who resorted to civil disobedience and violence. International students, particularly from the UK and the US, supported the movement, amplifying its message globally. These protests, fueled by historical injustices and social media, extended into primary and secondary schools, influencing leaders like Miss Joel.

Just before her appointment, Miss Joel found herself at the epicenter of these protests. Having witnessed similar student unrest at a local university, where she was threatened with violence and faced weeks of disruption due to riots, she knew firsthand the emotional intensity of such movements.

The protest energy soon reached primary and secondary schools, where parents and community members began questioning why they should pay for schooling, why white-rule and colonial structures remained, and why the curriculum lacked non-white representation. These concerns highlighted broader issues of inclusivity and representation. As Miss Joel navigated these challenges, she realized that addressing deeply rooted inequities required more than policy changes—it demanded cultural transformation.

Crisis 2: #BlackLivesMatter

In July 2020, the global Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement sparked solidarity in South Africa, echoing the 2015 student protests for decolonizing education. The impact of BLM resonated strongly due to the economic marginalization of black South Africans and the government's failure to address historical injustices. Across the country, schools faced allegations of racism from both former and current students, which were amplified on social media platforms like Instagram and Facebook.

Miss Joel and her school were not exempt from this intense backlash. In response to BLM and the murmurs of discontent among parents and community members, she proactively initiated parent focus groups to address the issues raised. She also called for community input through various channels, with the aim to ensure diverse voices were heard in addressing the crises. She used the school's social media platforms—including Facebook, Instagram, and X—to invite feedback and encourage dialogue from the wider community. In addition, she placed a notice in the local newspaper to reach those who may not be active online and sent numerous letters and reminders to parents and alumni, outlining the steps she was taking and encouraging their involvement. These efforts were part of her broader strategy to create a space for open communication and community engagement, while also addressing long-standing grievances and building a path toward transformation. These focus groups ran over several weeks, and all parents, alumni and community members were invited and encouraged to attend. She hired outside professionals to facilitate these focus groups, so that parents could feel comfortable and their opinion valued, in a more private and confidential space. Miss Joel aimed to create a neutral environment for open dialogue.

The accusations leveled against her school were serious and damaging:

1. **Racial Bias in Drama Casting:** A white Drama teacher had reportedly told a black student that she couldn't audition for the role of "Snow White" in the annual school drama production because of her race.
2. **Lack of Representation in Sports Teams:** The school's Netball team consisted of 90% black students, while the Hockey team was 90% white. This disparity raised questions about the school's demographics and the lack of active efforts to address representation.
3. **Decolonization of Sports Offerings:** Parents questioned why the school did not offer sports such as soccer and cricket, which would allow broader participation from students of color.

4. **Inclusion in School Environment:** Students of color felt excluded by the school's historical artifacts, including honors boards and plaques that failed to acknowledge their harrowing experiences. In addition, the lack of fair representation among teaching staff and the school's colonialist house names and songs further exacerbated highly emotional feelings of exclusion.

Miss Joel faced immense pressure. Parents participating in the focus groups demanded action, emphasizing that mere dialogue was insufficient. These accusations placed Miss Joel in a precarious position, requiring her to navigate both the immediate emotional fallout and the systemic changes demanded by the community. Previous promises had proven empty, leaving them skeptical. When Miss Joel shared the findings with staff, emotions ran high. Some teachers felt attacked, arguing that "changing the past" was impossible given entrenched norms and history. In their opinion, this was unfair and accusatory. Some teachers went so far as to threaten Miss Joel with legal action, based on these accusations from parents, and the perceived lack of support from the school. The School Governing Body appreciated Miss Joel's proactive approach but wondered if the situation would eventually "blow over." The insinuation was that the overall goal of the 21st-century school vision should remain the focus. Meanwhile, the state urged immediate action to prevent media attention, as they did not want these matters to end up "on their desk." Finally, alumni made it clear during several rather tense meetings, that certain aspects of the school's history were untouchable, and that Miss Joel should know and support this.

Notes for Leadership Case Study: Pedagogical Analysis

The following section provides a pedagogical analysis of the leadership case study involving Miss Joel. These notes are intended to guide discussions and encourage critical engagement with the complexities presented in the case. Use the prompts to analyze the case, debate different perspectives, and explore how leadership decisions impact various stakeholders.

Theme 1: Change Management in a Historically Segregated Context

Miss Joel's experiences encompass the complexity of leading a historically "white-only" school in a post-apartheid context, focusing on addressing inequities while pushing for modernization and inclusion. This context provides a rich case for analyzing how leadership must adapt to both a school's historical legacy and a changing demographic landscape (Fullan, 2023). Miss Joel's leadership illustrates the complexities of driving cultural and systemic transformation.

These challenges are well-documented in leadership literature and are not unique to South Africa. Change Management emphasizes the importance of social justice leadership and the need for further exploration, particularly in non-Western contexts, to gain a global understanding of equitable leadership practices (Gümüş et al., 2020). School leaders must navigate complex challenges, including legacies of segregation,

limited resources, and the intersectionality of student identities (DeMatthews et al., 2021). Effective change management in schools requires leaders to recognize and address marginalization, such as institutional racism and ableism. Transformative leadership is essential for embedding equity into the educational framework, not only raising awareness but also actively dismantling unjust practices (Soda, 2023). Educational policy plays a pivotal role in supporting or hindering these efforts, underscoring the need for policymakers to consult experts to create enabling environments that empower leaders to drive change (Soda, 2023).

According to Heifetz and Linsky (2017), adaptive leadership involves mobilizing people to tackle tough challenges and thrive. Miss Joel had to navigate the existing power structures and cultural expectations while encouraging the school community to embrace a new vision. These challenges were further exacerbated by the crisis situations Miss Joel encountered, such as the #FeesMustFall and #BlackLivesMatter movements, which highlighted systemic inequities and demanded urgent responses.

Miss Joel's proactive approach—inviting community members, initiating focus groups, and activating media and social media to address accusations of racial bias and representation in the school—demonstrated her effort to transform the culture while building trust. Successful leadership in schools requires sensitivity to the unique historical, cultural, and socioeconomic contexts of the institution (Falkner & Tillis, 2024). Miss Joel's experience underscores the importance of balancing tradition with the need for systemic transformation, particularly in a setting marked by a legacy of segregation and evolving community expectations.

Key Pedagogical Questions Include

- How can school leaders sustain institutional excellence while authentically fostering diversity and inclusion, ensuring that both are seen as integral to the school's success?
- What leadership strategies and change management techniques can be used to handle resistance from school stakeholders?
- Do you think Miss Joel effectively used transformational and adaptive leadership techniques to navigate the challenges she faced in her school setting? Why or why not? Support your answer with literature or details from the case.

Teaching Activities and Discussion Prompts

- Develop a crisis management plan to address community concerns about representation and inclusivity, based on the four accusations leveled with the school.
- Analyze Miss Joel's change management approach in implementing focus groups. With a study partner design a comparative table to record the "benefits" and "challenges" of her approach. Share your findings with the class.
- What innovative leadership strategies would you utilize if you were Miss Joel? Support your strategies with connections to relevant literature.

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Theme 2: Equity, Diversity, and Representation in School

The complexities of racial equity within the school’s leadership and staff composition are highly prevalent in the case of Miss Joel’s school. Given that the school’s leadership and staff are white while the student body is diverse, this case provides a valuable lens for examining systemic barriers to leadership diversity and how these barriers impact the culture of a school (Lumby, 2016). The implications of racial representation in leadership roles, strategies for promoting equity, and the challenges of fostering a culture that respects diversity, requires attention across all facets of school life (Cager et al., 2023).

Racial equity in educational leadership is crucial for fostering an inclusive school environment. According to Theoharis (2007), social justice leadership involves actively working to improve the educational experiences of marginalized students, which includes advocating for more diverse leadership. This advocacy is particularly important in contexts like Miss Joel’s school, where historical inequalities persist. Khalifa (2020) argues that culturally responsive school leadership is necessary for addressing the needs of diverse student populations, and this requires intentional efforts to recruit and support leaders from underrepresented groups. Miss Joel’s leadership provides a case study in how intentional recruitment and culturally responsive practices can address the complex dynamics of a diverse school community. Leadership diversity can enhance decision-making and create a more equitable school culture (Khalifa et al., 2016). In Miss Joel’s context, this highlights the importance of diversifying leadership to ensure the experiences and needs of all students are represented and addressed effectively.

Key Pedagogical Questions Include

- How does the lack of racial diversity in leadership impact the perception of inclusivity within Miss Joel’s school community, especially considering the racial dynamics described in the case?

- What are the potential benefits of having a more diverse leadership team in Miss Joel’s school, given its multicultural student population and the specific challenges she faced?
- How can school leaders enact policies to ensure equitable representation among staff?

Teaching Activities and Discussion Prompts

- Role-play a School Governing Body meeting where equity and representation are discussed, with participants playing various stakeholders (e.g., teachers, parents, state officials). Video record the role-play and then play-back for reflection and discussion.
- What leadership strategies can address perceptions of exclusivity when racial diversity in leadership is limited? Use digital collaboration platforms, such as Padlet or Canva, to map out innovative strategies for fostering equity and inclusivity in Miss Joel’s school.
- Think-Pair-Share: Reflect on the potential benefits of diverse leadership in Miss Joel’s school. First, individually consider how it could impact school culture and climate. Then, pair up to discuss how diversity could address this case’s specific challenges. Finally, with the group, collaboratively compile a list of actionable ideas to address the historical imbalances.

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Theme 3: Community-Led Crisis Response

This theme explores the challenges Miss Joel faced in responding to community-led crises, particularly the #BlackLivesMatter and #FeesMustFall movements, which highlighted demands for racial equity in the school. Newly appointed, Miss Joel initiated parent focus groups to address these issues and promote inclusion. However, these efforts revealed the complexity of managing diverse community expectations,

with stakeholders holding differing views on change. The focus groups became a space for both healing and tension, reflecting the difficulties of leading through crises with deeply entrenched beliefs.

Recent studies highlight the importance of adaptive leadership, communication, and community engagement in crisis management. For example, the COVID-19 pandemic underscored the need for community-led crisis response, as leaders relied on local stakeholders—parents, teachers, and students—to manage remote learning and ensure educational continuity. Grissom and Condon (2021) emphasize that leaders who adapted quickly and communicated clearly were better equipped to manage the crisis. Chatzipanagiotou and Katsarou (2023) identify resilience and innovation as key competencies for leaders navigating disruptions. These findings resonate with challenges faced by principals in the United States, where diversifying communities meet political pressures on diversity initiatives (Parcel & Taylor, 2015; White, 2016). Integrating these insights can guide leadership practices that balance tradition with systemic transformation, fostering inclusive and adaptive educational environments.

A key aspect of Miss Joel's response was fostering transparent communication to address tensions, alongside using external facilitators for focus groups. This approach aimed to create an unbiased and comfortable setting for community members to voice concerns. Crisis leadership strategies, such as these, involve transparent communication, active listening, and collaboration with external mediators to manage tensions and build trust. This strategy allowed her to leverage the crisis as an opportunity for growth and transformation, while addressing historical grievances and shaping future aspirations. However, Miss Joel faced tension from staff, alumni, and parents, demonstrating how these efforts can be derailed if trust and transparent communication are not consistently upheld.

The theme of community-led crisis response underscores how school leaders can build trust through transparency and open participation, particularly in highly charged situations. According to Shields (2010), transformative leadership fosters inclusive environments during crises, a principle Miss Joel applied as she addressed systemic inequities. Smith and Riley (2012) argue that crisis leadership should create the foundation for long-term change by involving all stakeholders. Miss Joel's actions demonstrate how community engagement, when effectively managed, can be a turning point for schools grappling with systemic inequities.

Key Pedagogical Questions Include

- What are the potential pitfalls and benefits of engaging parents and community members through focus groups and social media, and how can school leaders ensure that these conversations lead to constructive change rather than further division?
- How can school leaders manage conflicting community expectations during a crisis, ensuring that the needs of marginalized groups are addressed while maintaining unity within the school community?

- How can leaders balance immediate community concerns with long-term goals for inclusivity and equity, while empowering others to take action rather than defaulting to inaction due to fear of backlash?

Teaching Activities and Discussion Prompts

- Create a visual mind-map to show the relationships between key community stakeholders (e.g., parents, students, teachers, alumni, local organizations). Identify groups likely to resist or support change and areas of potential tension. Discuss with peers how these dynamics can help or hinder a leader's response to a crisis.
- Conduct a simulated focus group session, where students take on roles of various stakeholders (e.g., resistant staff, concerned parents, marginalized students). The focus should be on navigating conflicting views and building community consensus.
- Use a flowchart to map the leadership strategies Miss Joel used to address the crisis, highlighting both immediate actions and potential long-term outcomes involving the community.
- Create a 2-minute crisis-response video from Miss Joel's perspective. Address the concerns of key stakeholders (e.g., students, parents, alumni, staff) and demonstrate how you can view crises as opportunities for meaningful action, rather than defaulting to inaction out of fear of negative consequences.

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Conclusion

Miss Joel's journey reveals the complexities of leading a historically segregated school through transformation. Her efforts to address systemic inequities and foster

an inclusive culture, while managing diverse stakeholder expectations, highlight both the challenges and opportunities of crisis leadership. While rooted in South Africa, her experience reflects universal leadership challenges, such as navigating historical legacies, fostering equity, and managing crises—issues faced by educational leaders worldwide.

By turning community demands into opportunities for dialogue and reform, Miss Joel grew as a leader, balancing empathy with decisiveness, and viewing crises as catalysts for change. This case encourages future scholars and practitioners to explore how courage, empathy, and strategic decision-making can bridge the gap between historical legacies and a more inclusive future for educational institutions.

Author's Note

ERIC Descriptors: School Leadership, Educational Leadership Transformation, Historically Segregated Schools.

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Ethical Considerations

Informed consent for information published in this article was not obtained as this case is narrative in nature, and the reflections do not report on any factual data. The need for written informed consent is therefore waived.

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Note

1. In the South African context, the term “Colored” refers to a diverse group of people with mixed ancestry, including descendants of European, Asian, and Khoisan populations. It has specific historical significance, particularly under apartheid, where it was used to classify individuals outside the “white” or “black” categories.

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