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Looking below racism. Renegotiating authority and challenging sexism through subverting the policing of hairstyles at school, an inside view on a girls-led protest in Soweto, South Africa.

Abstract:

The policing of Black girls' hairstyles at school has become increasingly politicized and primarily analysed through the lenses of institutional racism, and to a lesser extent its intersections with sexism and religious discrimination, in post-segregationist education systems (the United States and South Africa in particular). While acknowledging that such dimensions often feed in the policing of learners' hairstyles, I argue that there is a need to look below explanations in terms of racism to understand the other issues at stake, especially in the case of conflicts that have led to collective mobilisations in low-income de facto racially segregated schools. Through focusing on a girls-led protest in a Sowetan high school that happened in August 2017; and based on observations of the mobilisation, class discussions facilitated as a co-teacher as well as participation in staff and parental meetings in its aftermath, and a reflective interview with the main instigator of the protest conducted in 2021; I discuss how the contestation of the policing of learners' hairstyles was both ignited by and became an opportunity to challenge the lack of democracy at the school, the social conservatism of the parents, and the sexualisation of girls' bodies. The case study hence sheds light on the multifaceted ways in which power may be exerted through policing hairstyles at school, and on the subtle various forms of politicization and selective obedience to school dress code rules that may enable learners to partly reclaim it.

In August 2016, the image of thirteen-year-old Zulaikha Patel leading a protest at the prestigious *Pretoria High School for Girls (PHSG)* – a Black girl in uniform proudly wearing a large afro, with crossed arms and clenched fists, bravely facing a White teacher, see below – came in the South African and international spotlight (Daniels, 2020). The protesters were denouncing the derogatory comments they repeatedly received on their hairstyles from teachers, the school's official ban of afros and locks, and staff constantly discouraging them to converse in other languages than Afrikaans and English¹. The image quickly became a symbol for the Black learners attending post-apartheid multiracial schools who felt racially discriminated against, and because of their hairstyles specifically. In the following weeks, similar protests were staged by Black girls in upper- and middle-class girls' schools throughout the country, who carried anti-racist slogans such as "Black Hair Matters" or "Comb down your intolerance".

¹¹ The staff was predominantly White, and these are the two home languages spoken by the White minority in South Africa, although not exclusively.



Picture posted on social media by one of the protesting girls (Twitter, 2016)

In a context contemporary to the Fallist mobilisations at South African universities where calls for “decolonizing education” became prominent (Plazky Miller, 2019), these protests gained visibility and support, including by Angela Davis who was visiting South Africa at the time (Dee Dougan, 2016). In media and academic publications (Tate, 2017), the denunciation of the restrictions against “Black hairstyles”² contained in school dress codes and the intrusive ways in which they are implemented were primarily read as a struggle against the continuation of “institutional racism” and “colonialism” in recently desegregated schools, as these restrictions implicitly uphold White standards of beauty and respectability in deeming Black hairstyles “not neat”. Since August 2016, relaxing the restrictions on Black hairstyles has been put on the agenda of the “racial transformation” of the education system by the Minister of Basic Education (Mlambo, 2021) and the provincial Department of Education in Gauteng³, by the para-governmental *Human Rights Commission* (SAHRC, 2016), and by prominent legal advocacy groups (Veriava, 2021). Some schools have also proactively engaged in dialogues to review their policies on hairstyles (Patel, 2016).

These mobilisations, their wide mediatisation, and the significant responses they ignited all occurred in relation to multiracial schools – which, despite the formal racial desegregation of the education system, only constitute a privileged fringe of South African schools.

Under apartheid, learners used to be channelled in highly unequal schools and taught a separate curriculum by differentially trained teachers according to the four main racial categorisations: White, Indian, Coloureds and Blacks (Kallaway, 2002); and the former racial classifications of the schools still

² Alike Rogers and colleagues (2021), I use the expression to highlight the social and political racialization of specific hairstyles which have become associated with Blackness in various contexts. It encompasses natural (afros, locks, coils, shorts...) and plaited styles (braids, cornrows, twists...). This certainly does not imply that chemically relaxed and comb pressed styles or weaves should be considered signs of Black self-hate or cultural assimilation. Black women and girls may adopt such hairstyles for many reasons including fashion, experimentation or individual emancipation. Yet, unlike the former hairstyles which have been heavily politicized as collective identity markers of Blackness, both as sites of oppression and as revolutionary power statements, the latter ones have historically developed as conformist strategies enabling Black women to have “good hair” in post-segregationist contexts (Banks, 2000).

³ Schools are primarily administered by provincial departments of education in South Africa. In Gauteng, the head of the department, MEC Panyaza Lesufi, visited multiple schools where conflicts over the policing of hairstyles were reported and created two committees in 2016 and 2017 to facilitate the review of schools’ policies on hairstyles and “remove rules fostering racial discrimination” (Mashaba, 2016; Fengu, 2017).

strongly structure contemporary educational inequalities⁴. As Spauls puts it (2013), the post-apartheid schooling system follows a “bimodal distribution”. A quarter of the schools (mostly those formerly reserved to learners classified as White and Indians) concentrate material and human resources while the rest (mostly those formerly reserved to Black and Coloured learners) are under-resourced, and this translates in poor academic outcomes for the majority. The desegregation of schools has only occurred in a “one-way fashion”: former Whites-only schools host an increasingly racially diverse population of learners (even though the most privileged public and recently founded private schools retain a significant minority of White learners), former Indians-only schools accommodate growing numbers of Black and Coloured learners, while former Coloureds- and Blacks-only school remain largely racially segregated (Chisholm and Sujee, 2006). A recent study based on 2021 enrolments found that, on average, a Black learner attends a school that is 96% Black (Gruijters, Elbers and Reddy, 2022). Meanwhile, the school staff composition tends to typically reflect the former racial classifications to an even greater extent due to the legacy of segregated teacher training and racially biased representations of competences (Davids, 2019).

Hence, in former Whites-only schools such as *PHSG*, which often predominantly employ a White staff while accommodating a growing number of non-White learners, the policing of learners’ hairstyles takes more racial forms. The recent politicization of the racism lodged in the schools’ restrictions targeting Black hairstyles forms part of a broader growing politicization of routinized forms of racism embedded in the organisational ethos of these schools, fed by the mediatization of recurrent racist behaviours perpetrated by teachers in prestigious schools (Sapa, 2014, 2015; MandG, 2017; Pitt, 2018) and learners’ use of social media to testify about their experiences of racism (Tembo, 2020). Yet, I submit that this politicized anti-racist framing of the denunciation of the policing of learners’ hairstyles inadequately reflects the nature of the contentions over such practices which arise in de facto Blacks-only schools in South Africa. Rather, in such school contexts, these contentions point towards other dimensions of the post-apartheid “transformation” of the schooling system than those associated with the racial desegregation of middle- and upper-class schools. They affect significantly more learners and staff, but have attracted less media, political and academic attention.

In providing an inside view on a girls-led protest in a Sowetan⁵ public high school which happened one year after the mobilisation at *PHSG* in August 2017, I analyse how a conflict over the policing of learners’ hairstyles and its resolution in the short and long run acutely reveal underlying tensions associated with the democratisation of schooling in South Africa, and the exacerbated forms they take in a Black urban township setting. In exploring the views and stakes of the mobilised and less mobilised learners, the school staff, and the parents, I show that, while the success of the girls’ mobilisation paradoxically relied on targeting a highly politicized issue pre-framed as anti-racist, the contentions were never articulated nor experienced as denunciations of racism by those directly involved in the conflict. Instead, I submit that the contentions were manifold and that the protest and its effects essentially amounted to a renegotiation of authority at school between the learners and the adults, involving staff and parents. Unpacking the processes of conflictualizing and pacification of the hairstyle crisis sheds light both on the multifaceted ways in which power may be exerted through policing hairstyles at school when “looking below racism”, and on the subtle articulation between different forms of politicization and selective obedience to the dress code that may enable learners to partly reclaim it.

⁴ The redistributive effect of the numerous educational reforms adopted in the 1990s was limited by a range of factors including austerity in public spending, the ability of schools located in privileged areas to raise funds, and the wider legacy of urban and rural segregation (Fiske and Ladd, 2004).

⁵ Soweto is the biggest township located around Johannesburg with 1.7 million inhabitants (GCRO, 2019).

To develop this argument, I first explain how combining three approaches to politicization (conventional, ordinary, and considering depoliticization as a form of politicization) helps to understand why conflicts over the policing of learners' hairstyles are only partially approached in media and academic publications. I suggest that the dominant anti-racist framing of such conflicts – which is particularly salient in the United States, the United Kingdom, and South Africa – is mainly produced by conventional politicization. This tends to overshadow other contentions that may find expression through such conflicts but have hardly led to an interpellation of formal political authorities (I).

I then give an overview of the events under scrutiny at the school and present my methodology (II).

Then, I show that the conventional politicization of the policing of learners' hairstyles framed as conflicts against racism at school, as well as additional conventional politicization of racism at school and school protests at the time, provided opportunities for the mobilisation. Nonetheless, I submit that the ill-fitting of the anti-racist framing of the conflict then immediately served the school staff to delegitimize the seriousness of the protesters' claims (III).

Thereafter, I highlight the multiple contentions over the policing of learners' hairstyles that surfaced during the protest and in its aftermath through ordinary forms of politicization at the school, related to the lack of democracy at school and in the local community (IV).

Eventually, I analyse how the consultation that unfolded at the school after the protest amounted to processes of depoliticization as politicization, which entailed a pacification that was instrumental to both the school administration and the mobilised learners to advance their immediate interests, while enabling a counterintuitive democratization of the school and the community (conclusion).

I) Combining definitions of politicization to broaden our understanding of learners' hairstyles as a site of power exertion and resistance

A) Conventional and ordinary politicizations, and depoliticization as politicization

The term politicization is widely used and debated in political science. It helps to conceptualize the political as the outcome of a work of politicization, and not as an intrinsic quality of an issue, an actor, or a behaviour. Simply put, it places the focus on the processes through which “anything” may become political. To avoid the risk of diluting the notion of the political and rendering politicization a “sponge-concept” (Aït-Aoudia, Mounia, and Contamin, 2010), it is immediately clear that such processes need to be carefully defined.

A range of theoretical propositions has been formulated in this regard, depending on the disciplinary anchoring of the authors. Without attempting to discuss them in any exhaustive way, it is useful to have in mind that different definitions of politicization have been instrumental in advancing various branches of political studies. Initially, conceptualizing politicization as processes of professionalization and autonomization of the institutionalized political field has been key for historians looking at nation- and state- building (Weber, 1976; Agulhon, 1979). Thereafter, classic works in political sociology on voting preferences and patterns have reframed politicization as processes of acquisition of knowledge and competences in relationship to parties, elections, and procedural democracy (Lagroye, 2003). Meanwhile, political scientists researching the functioning of public administrations and the making of public policies have alternatively approached politicization as processes of framing and publicization of public problems (Hassenteufel, 2010). More recently, researchers in international and European studies have looked at (de)politicization as processes of polarization of opinions or as technicization of public policies and debates to question supranational forms of democratic representation (Chopin, 2010 ; Louis and Maertens, 2021). Each definition leads us to approach the political in a different way, with associated focus and blind spots.

To make sense of the Sowetan protest in an encompassing way, and through it reveal the multiple political contentions that may be associated with the policing of hairstyles at school, I suggest articulating three approaches to the politicization of issues, specifically. They all rely on a contentious conceptualization of the political as the “arbitration of conflict in a society” (Leca, 1973; Fraser, 1989) and one that assumes that politicization is first and foremost a process of channelled conflictualization, which emerges as soon as different, at least partly oppositional, positions and projects come to be consolidated and advocated in relationship to an issue (Mouffe, 2003).

The first approach may be considered “conventional” insofar as it relies on a narrow conception of the political, restricted to the institutionalized political field, that is: the range of institutions that are formally specialized in politics such as elected and other governmental entities and political parties (Button and al, 2016: 2). Following that approach, the politicization of an issue describes the processes through which an issue is constituted as a public problem in relation to the institutionalized political field. These processes involve the increased “salience” of an issue, or of ways to frame this issue, in public debates; the inclusion of wider audiences to this “cause”; forms of interpellation of the formal political field to bring about solutions to this problem; and some kind of interventions by governmental entities to address the problem. Such an approach to politicization may also be conceptualized as “legitivist” in the sense that it describes the processes through which an issue becomes problematically framed in such a manner that it deserves the attention of mass publics, and to be addressed as a priority by those invested with formal political authority (Grignon and Passeron, 1989).

The second approach seeks to apprehend “ordinary forms of politicization” (Hamidi, 2022), that is, forms of politicization which constitute an object as political without necessarily directly relating it to the institutionalized political field; and that requires to investigate how political behaviours and attitudes are socially embedded. Here, the processes of politicization of an issue still constitute it as a problem, but not necessarily one that becomes “public” to the same magnitude than in the legitimist definition, and without necessarily leading to a direct interpellation of the formal political field. Instead, politicization refers to the ways in which an issue that may have been considered an isolated, individual, or private matter, becomes understood as “common problems calling for a collective response” in a community (Hamidi, 2022: 64). It typically consists in the making of links between various situations or individual experiences as exemplifying or resulting from a similar injustice, often involving emotional and cognitive dimensions which lead some members of the community to be “moved” from their initial position, in a similar direction (Hamidi, 2022: 69). This may encourage these members to engage in attempts to interpellate the community about this common problem, and attempts to formulate and bring about collective solutions, which may indirectly be related to the institutionalized political field, or at least to the instituted leadership of this community. These processes of constitution of the issue as a collective problem in need of collective solution are likely to be incomplete, inconsistent, across the community.

Uncover these processes of ordinary politicization of the policing of hairstyles requires to conduct a qualitative fieldwork study, attentive to the less visible and more messy dimensions of problem and solution framing of restrictions on hairstyles at school, which occur alongside publicized ones. I therefore take the Sowetan school protest as a case to illustrate these forms of ordinary politicization, through focusing on the various attempts to define the contentions at stake in the mobilisation and its aftermath – that is, to frame the collective problem in need of collective solution – from the perspective of learners, parents, and school staff. These frames may often only be indirectly derived from what is stated in interviews and class discussions and enacted in meetings or staging of a protest, as they may not be straightforwardly expressed.

The third approach to politicization completing this conceptual framework is derived from a theoretical proposition initially aimed at enlarging the conceptualization of conventional forms of politicization in the context of international organisations. It consists in considering depoliticization as a particular form of politicization (Jaeger, 2007; Le Bellec, 2022). In that approach, depoliticization may be defined as processes of apparent de-problematisation of an issue that was previously successfully framed as a public problem, often through encouraging the adoption of technical solutions. The term has been used to make sense of the treatment of public problems through expertise within the European Union or the United Nations (Chopin, 2010 ; Louis and Maertens, 2021). Defined as such, depoliticization processes occur in tandem with conventional politicization. Further conceptualizing them as a sub-type of politicization – or perhaps more accurately, as forms of secondary politicization – helps to foreground these processes as political practices aimed at “concealing” or “minimizing” the political contentions associated with an issue, through technicization and superficial pacification (Louis and Maertens, 2021: 3). It underlines that such processes do not erase but further pursue the work of politicization operated on an issue, without resolving the contentions at stake, and often get more actors involved in addressing the problem (Jaeger 2007), typically through seeking the advice of experts or organizing procedural consultations. I apply this approach to depoliticization as politicization to ordinary forms of politicization as well. It enables me to conceptualize the processes of shifting to technical or legal responses to contentions over the policing of learners’ hairstyles in a school as a subtle continuation of the renegotiation of authority between adults and learners.

Articulating these three approaches to politicization allows to hold together and compare the contentions over the policing of hairstyles at school that find a straightforward resonance in the institutional political sphere, and those less intelligibly expressed and remaining confined to the school community, including when they take the appearance of resolution practices. Hence, they enable to broaden our understanding of learners’ hairstyles as a site of power exertion and resistance, beyond the most publicly commented dimensions of anti-racist politics.

Indeed, before discussing how they illuminate the contentions at stake in the Sowetan protest, it is necessary to explain how conflicts over the policing of learners’ hairstyles have come to be primarily analysed in those terms in South Africa, and beyond, through conventional politicization.

B) A conventional politicization of a non-conventional political object: how the policing of learners’ hairstyles came to be primarily framed as anti-racist politics

It is worth underlining first that hairstyling is a non-conventional political research object, insofar as individuals tend to engage in these practices without conceiving them as political, often claiming that they are simply a reflection of individual preferences which should not be over-politicized. Only some hairstyles become politicized in specific contexts and times, and I submit that it has recently increasingly been the case of Black hairstyles in multiracial schools in post-segregationist contexts.

A preliminary step is to recognize the historical politicization of Black hairstyles as sites of anti-racist politics. As Shirley Tate (2017) has underlined, hair is a “personal surfacing” which is structurally loaded with social and political symbolic meaning, along gendered and racialized lines, and hence may become a site of power exertion and display, and of political resistance. This is particularly true of Black hairstyles: there is an abundant literature, primarily focused on Black-Americans in the United States, that underlines that, historically, hair only comes second to skin as a corporal site of symbolic racial stigmatisation of Blackness, which has its roots in slave trades, colonisation, and segregationist regimes (Mercer, 1987). Hair colour and texture have been used as official tools of racial classification, as the infamous “pencil test” under apartheid attests, and still operate as key dimensions of racialization of individuals, especially in contexts where skin colour is a particularly

ambivalent social marker of racialized groups such as the Caribbean islands (Smeralda, 2014) or cosmopolite urban settings in post-colonial societies (Tate, 2007; Sims, Pirtle and Johnsons-Arnold, 2020). Meanwhile, this literature also stresses that Black hairstyles have been invested as practices of resistance to racial oppression in multiple ways, including the use of cornrows to map slave escaping routes (Daibiri, 2019), the central symbolic role of dreadlocks in the Rastafarian movement as a sign of spiritual and political connexion to East African anti-colonial struggles (King, 2002), or the popularization of the afro as a statement of Black proudness and a claim for racial equality among the militants of the Black Power movement in the United States or the Black Consciousness movement in South Africa (Mokoena, 2016). Authors have also pointed that Black hairstyles should not be historically reduced to sites of racial oppression and resistance, especially in West Africa, as they were integral to practices of adornment and power display in ancient kingdoms and smaller political communities prior to the colonial encounter (Ellington and Underwood, 2020). Yet, most recent studies on Black hairstyles approach them through the lenses of racialization and anti-racist politics.

Research focused on the policing of hairstyles at school is more limited but growing, and similarly increasingly approaches it as a contentious site of anti-racist politics. It has only emerged as an independent topic of publications since 2015, with most publications focused on the United States (US), the United Kingdom (UK), and South Africa. The publications dealing with the US and UK build on previous studies which have demonstrated how disciplining and punishment practices tend to be systematically harsher towards Black learners in both these national education systems (Wallace and Joseph-Salisburg, 2022); and they argue that the policing of hairstyles significantly accounts for these institutional biases. This body of research has accumulated substantial evidence derived from diverse research methods including statistical studies on school suspensions, textual analyses of publicly available schools' dress code rules, testimonies of Black adolescents about everyday racism at school, and unpacking media reports about disciplinary action taken by schools against Black learners' hairstyles.

In the US context, authors have found that Black girls are six times more likely to be "pushed out" of school than White girls and that offences to the dress code are one of the most widespread ground for suspension for Black girls (Crenshaw and al, 2015); that a "coded language" is used in the dress code rules and often in the policies on hairstyles which implicitly labels Black hairstyles as "unprofessional" and "distractive" (Martin and Brooks, 2020); that Black girls frequently refer to experiences of being discriminated based on their hairstyles at school when sharing stories about everyday racism (Rogers and al, 2021); and that popular outrage and mediatization of cases of suspension or disciplining targeting Black hairstyles at school are increasingly common (Pettyway, 2017). A recent online survey among female learners, conducted nationally, found that 45% of the Black respondents felt they had experienced hair-based discrimination at school, and it reaches 66% for those attending majority-White schools – it should be underlined that the survey was conducted by advocacy groups and the cosmetic firm *Dove* (JOY Collective, 2021).

Similarly, the first academic survey on hair-based discrimination conducted in the UK found that schools are the primary sites where attitudes towards "Afro textured hair" are formed among Black children (De Leon and Chikwendu, 2019). In comparing how Black parents recall experiences of hair-based discrimination at school and those shared by their children, the survey suggests that they become less common but remain widespread: it affects one in six Black children respondent versus one in four Black parent respondents in their childhoods. The children also seem to develop fewer negative attitudes towards "Afro textured hair" than their parents say they did, even if these stay high: 41% of the Black children said they would rather have "straight Caucasian or Asian hair"

compared to 68% of the parents. Meanwhile, the survey reveals that, increasingly, such experiences relate to the implementation of school policies: it concerns 27% of the adults' testimonies and 46% of the children's, representing a 67% increase. These findings corroborate earlier qualitative studies based on media reports, which single out UK schools as key institutions of social control of Black bodies alongside the Police, including through the policing of Black hairstyles via the dress code (Joseph-Salisbury and Connelly, 2018).

Some authors suggest that there is a tightening of school rules on dress codes specifically targeted at Black learners (Macon, 2015), which serves a broader project of "resegregation of schooling" in the US (Johnson and King, 2018). Other authors rather underline that the surge of media reports about hair-based discrimination, and the fact that they feature more prominently in testimonies about everyday racism among Black girls, is symptomatic of the societal trend of de-stigmatisation of Black hairstyles among Black women and girls, sometimes described as the "nappy hair movement"⁶ (Rogers and al, 2021). This is observed in the radical drop of sells for hair relaxers, the boom of hair salons and products specialised in "natural" Black hairstyles, and the popularity of the *Black Lives Matter* movement. These authors suggest that it is not so much the schools who have adopted stricter dress codes to discriminate against Black learners, but rather that Black learners dare to experiment with Black hairstyles more at school, which reveals how White norms of respectability have been implicitly upheld by most schools, without assuming that these are becoming harsher. The UK data rather support the second hypothesis (De Leon and Chikwendu, 2019).

Furthermore, this societal trend has translated into the political and legal realm in both these countries with the adoption of the CROWN Act ("*Creating a Respectful and Open World for Natural Hair*") in the US, by no less than twenty states since 2019 and the House of Representatives in March 2022. It recognises discrimination based on hair texture, type, or style as a form of racial discrimination, in the context of employment, housing, advertising, and in public and charter schools (Martin and Brooks, 2020). A national "CROWN coalition" has been founded to lobby for its adoption which gathers a hundred organizations (Crownact website, 2023). In the UK, hair-based discrimination is recognised in the Equality Act since 2010. The "Halo collective" has been founded to campaigns for the adoption of a "Halo Code" by schools and workplaces that values and allows Black hairstyles, and to amend the Equality Act for it to explicitly address hair-based discrimination in these settings (Halocollective website, 2023). An international organisation, initiated by activists based in the UK, was even formed to advocate for the recognition of hair-based discrimination through the celebration of a "World Afro Day" on September 15th, endorsed by the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights since 2017 (WorldAfroDay website, 2023). It sponsored the survey on hair-based discrimination in UK schools.

Hence, recent research about the policing of learners' hairstyles in the United States and United Kingdom has been, understandably and legitimately so, much framed around the denunciation of the ways in which it indirectly perpetuates racism – conceptualized in a various ways as "proxy discrimination" (Macon, 2015; Gaddy, 2021), "institutional" or "state" racism (De Leon and Chikwendu, 2019), "post-racial" or "colour-blind" racism (Joseph-Salisbury and Connelly, 2018). This research (academic and/or sponsored by advocacy groups) is integral to the process of legitimist politicization of the issue, as it helps to constitute it as a public problem in need to be addressed by the institutionalized political field.

⁶ The term is negatively connoted in the United States and describes a tightly coiled hair texture (Banks, 2000). It has been positively reappropriated, especially in francophone Africa and its diaspora in Europe, as a portmanteau of "natural" and "happy".

This anti-racist framing of the conflicts over the policing of learners' hairstyles through conventional politicization also applies to South Africa in at least two ways. First, the protest at *PHSG* has been predominantly framed both in the country and internationally as an anti-racist protest in the media and in academic publications. Many authors have drawn parallels between the protest and the mediatised cases of Black learners targeted by schools' restrictions on hairstyles in other countries (Tate, 2017; Martin and Brooks, 2020; Daniels, 2020); and the protest is still used as a point of reference by advocacy groups focused on combating hair-based discrimination. For instance, one of the petitions advertised on the website of the Halo Collective uses the picture of Zulaikha Patel reproduced in introduction (Daibiri, 2020). Secondly, the protest at *PHSG* and those that followed provoked interventions by high-rank officials from the Department of Education and other governmental institutions. Besides encouraging public communications by the political authorities around these events, it also led to the institutionalization of two committees by the Gauteng Department of Education in charge of assisting schools to review their dress code policies, as mentioned in introduction.

Nonetheless, it should be underlined that the politicization of the conflicts over the policing of learners' hairstyles is perhaps less rigidly framed as anti-racist than in the UK and US, insofar as there are no dedicated advocacy group focused on hair-based discrimination, no quantitative study on the topic, and the qualitative ones are solely based on media reports (Tate, 2017; Daniels, 2020). What is more, South Africa is the only country that has experienced multiple school protests initiated by learners related to the policing of hairstyles. Such collective mobilisations are more likely to be expressions of a pluri-dimensional dissent, as opposed to the cases of individual learners targeted by their schools' policy on hairstyles. In the US and UK, the latter have recurrently led to litigation, which has contributed to rigidify the framing of such conflicts in the language of discrimination. For instance, at *PHSG*, the protesting girls did not only mobilise against the policing of Black hairstyles, but also to be allowed to converse in other languages than English and Afrikaans at school. These are two demands that surfaced in the media, and they were probably more, but no fieldwork has been conducted at the school to illuminate this complexity.

In fact, all these recent publications that focus specifically on the policing of hairstyles at school which adopt and convey this anti-racist framing are not based on qualitative fieldwork in the schools that have been marked by conflicts. This is a significant shortcoming.

Conversely, other studies focused on the policing of appearances at school more broadly, which mention the policing of learners' hairstyles, reveals other important aspects that the dominant anti-racist framing does not account for.

Let us focus on South African publications first. An early strand of publications in legal studies reveals that conflicts over the policing of hairstyles in post-apartheid schools initially concerned religious discrimination with landmark litigations preventing schools to ban hairstyles or garments understood as religious: the hijab, dreadlocks, the Hindu headscarf, the kippa (Alston, 2002; Van Vallenhoven, 2005). Even if such a litigation occurred more recently (Free State High Court, 2013), this aspect has been side-lined in recent academic and public debates on the policing of learners' hairstyles.

Other studies focused on school desegregation underline that the school staff tends to associate the maintenance of academic standards through the perpetuation of a racial "ethos", "organisational habitus" or "tone", which involves the policing of learners' hairstyles. This may lead to preventing Black hairstyles in former White schools (Hunter, 2019), or to only allowing Black hairstyles to Black learners as an essentialist form of cultural recognition, while labelling braids worn by White learners as "disruptive" (Carter, 2012). These authors further underline that dress and hairstyles are dynamic among learners, and that race is being recoded through "taste" in dress or music styles (Dolby, 2001; Carter, 2012). These studies hence underscore the need to "look below racism" to understand

conflicts over the policing of learners' appearances, and to pay attention to the ways in which a school's image, relationships between staff, parents, and learners, or the learners' desire to access global consumption goods interplay, in a moment of rapid democratisation.

Lastly, two recent sociological publications on dress code rules in schools foreground how contentions over the policing of learners' appearances are highly structured by gender and class. Pattman and Bhana's study (2021) focuses on a middle-class, former Indians-only, coeducational school. It underlines that hairstyle may be the site of racist comments among learners, but that the dress code is not viewed as racist. Rather, the female learners perceive it as sexist as they feel it constrains them more than boys. Nonetheless, the authors underline that the girls obey the rules, and even police each other's skirt length, as they have interiorised the association between academic reputation and the heteronormative control of their body parts. This reveals how contentious schools' dress code, experienced as vehicle of sexism, may not be openly contested by learners, especially in more privileged schools where they may gain social distinction from strict rules on appearance. By contrast, Gaillard-Thurston's study (2017) is focused on a working-class former Coloureds-only school. She underlines that many Black girls are not abiding to the dress code for many reasons, unrelated to racism nor sexism. Some learners cannot afford the cost of the uniform. She submits that micro-subversions of the dress code should be viewed as markers of social status among learners coming from poor to very poor households. She adds that not respecting the rules on make-up or on nail polishing is also a way for learners to regain self-esteem or hide sickness. She concludes that the learners don't oppose dress code rules per se, but challenge those they perceived as "non-sensical" and unrelated to academic success, and those enforced in harmful ways.

When looking at studies on school uniforms in other countries, the plurality of issues at stake in conflicts over the policing of learners' appearances becomes more visible. Beside the class, race, gender, or religious dimensions already mentioned, most studies underline that the dress code serves to maintain a divide and a hierarchy between learners and educators, which is determined by the historical context. For instance, Tamura (2007) has shown that school dress codes have been significantly and systematically relaxed in the late 1980s and 1990s in Japanese schools in the context of the "post-scarcity era" marked by "heightened consumerism" and the constitutionalising of the right to freedom of expression. This made the contradictions between the learners' aspirations to express individuality and the school authorities too conflictual and led to successful litigations initiated by families opposing their school's dress code. The justifications for maintaining or relaxing a school dress code also reflect the shifting social functions attributed to the schooling institution. Friedrich and Shanks (2021) have recently shown that Scottish schools practically rely on uniforms as a "disciplinary technique" to control learners' bodies and to enforce the authority of educators, while justifying uniforms as a way to make learners "respectable" and "employable", which they interpret as "neoliberal governmentality". Hence, while the theme of renegotiation of authority between learners, educators, and parents has hardly been investigated in studies focused on the policing of learners' hairstyles, this is prominent in research on uniforms at school.

This review of literature hence reveals a plurality of contentions that may be associated with the policing of learners' appearances, and of hairstyles specifically, which may only be uncovered through looking for ordinary forms of politicization involving fieldwork in schools. It therefore encourages us to investigate the effects of the dominant framing of conflicts over the policing of learners' hairstyles as anti-racist through conventional politicization on the Sowetan protest, while "looking below racism" and paying attention to other forms of contention at stake potentially related to religion, social class, gender, staff-learners or parent-children relationships.

Before undertaking these analyses, I provide an overview of the events that occurred at the school and present my methodology.

II) Preliminary: overview of the events and of the methodology

A) Chronology of the mobilisation and the subsequent consultation at the school

The case study consists in analysing together both the processes of conflictualization and pacification at the school, which I suggest synthesizing in three phases: the preparation of the mobilisation, the day of the protest, and the subsequent consultation that unfolded at the school.

The preparation of the mobilisation started just after a three-weeks winter break, on the second week of the third term of the academic year 2017. It began through conversations among learners during break times in the courtyard, in which they shared grievances on the policing of hairstyles at the school. These were informally initiated by the President of the *Representative Council of Learners* (RCL), a group of five learners elected by the whole body. The President was a Grade 11 female learner called Mahlatse. As the older girls seemed interested in discussing ways to change the situation at the school, Mahlatse called for a gathering in an empty classroom during lunch break on the Wednesday. The meeting was essentially attended by girls, and they decided to stage a protest on the Friday, just after the school assembly⁷. This was not formally announced to the school staff.

The protest accordingly happened two days later, on the 4th of August 2017. About a hundred protesting girls – which is significant, but still constitutes a minority of the 1300 learners attending the school – managed to rapidly take control of the schoolground (I describe how below) and forced the shutdown of the school for the whole day. A police officer was called by the administrators, but he did not have to intervene. Three emergency meetings were held on that day involving staff and RCL. The Gauteng Department of Education was also swift to react: three officials came to the school in the afternoon to assist the school community in addressing the crisis.

From the following Monday, a consultative process unfolded at the school, to amend the policy on hairstyles. It was announced by the Principal, RCL and officials from the Department in assembly on that day. In the next days, the RCL was required to collect the list of hairstyles that learners wanted allowed by the code of conducts, but no additional formal discussion took place with the learners. A meeting was then held between the RCL and the school governing body (SGB) – made of representatives of staff, parents, and learners – to shortlist some hairstyles. Then, on the Saturday, a consultative meeting was held with the parents to decide whether some of the shortlisted hairstyles could be included in the dress code, and most were rejected. The issue of the policing of learners' hairstyles came up occasionally in staff meetings in the following weeks, as the teachers were asking the administrators to clarify the new rules. However, this was never formally done, and a version of the code of conducts was only circulated months after. There was no subsequent learners' mobilisation on hairstyles since.

B) Coteaching as a method: getting an inside view on the mobilisation, its aftermath and its long-term effects

The data discussed below were gathered as part of an ethnographic study in the school for my doctoral research between July and November 2017; and later through collecting materials and conducting interviews remotely, thanks to the relationships built with teachers and learners. This is complemented by a review of relevant online media reports contemporary to the protest.

My PhD was an exploration of forms of xenophobia and anti-xenophobia in the schooling institution, involving a comparative fieldwork in low-income schools in Johannesburg (Bouyat, 2021). I was

⁷ In that school, the learners gather twice a week in assemblies, used to convey information, to address the learners through motivational speeches by the staff, invited NGO members, and usually closed by a preaching.

collaborating with two Grade 9⁸ English teachers – Jens and Serafina, a 29-year-old White man and a 38-year-old Black woman – to codevelop and cofacilitate a two-month curriculum for anti-xenophobia education, inspired by critical pedagogies (Janks, 2009). We had enormous freedom in designing our lessons as the school principal trusted us and the Department’s inspections only targeted classes in higher grades, assessed through provincially set examinations. This latitude was further allowed by flexible curriculum prescriptions for language subjects. Indeed, the teaching plans contained in the *Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statements* list reading, listening, viewing, writing, and presenting tasks and literary genres to be covered each term, practically leaving educators free to teach the topics and materials they deem relevant (DBE, 2012). They only contain set readings for Grade 12 learners preparing the end of school “Matric” exam. Thus, we were able to quickly modify our curriculum to respond pedagogically to the crisis around hairstyles, while respecting official prescriptions. Besides, I had developed a solid friendship with Jens through working with him since April 2016, and he was already close and used to codesign lessons with Serafina. This significant understanding among us allowed to tackle conflictual topics in class.

In total we dedicated two 45-minute periods to engaging on the protest in the week that followed the protest, with each of the seven Grade 9 classes of the school (six taught by Jens, one by Serafina), representing around 240 learners. We took notes of the debates and organised votes (see annexes). It was a unique opportunity to explore learners’ perspectives, when having such discussions outside a classroom was hardly possible considering the staff’s unsympathetic stance towards the mobilisation, and the tense climate at the school more generally. Besides, collaborating with the teachers meant that I could observe the daily running of the school, the staff and parental meetings, and the assemblies. It allowed me to witness the staging of the protest and key moments of the conflict resolution over several weeks. After I left the school, Jens and Serafina regularly updated me about the situation. They sent me the revised version of the code of conducts, organised a discussion among some learners eight months after the protest⁹, and described the evolution of the policing of learners’ hairstyles over the years. Collaborating with them hence enabled me to develop a range of approaches to provide an inside view on the protest, its aftermath, and its long-term effects.

Meanwhile, it also limited my initiatives. I was mostly confined to their classrooms during teaching times and often readjusted lessons during breaks, leaving me with little opportunities to interview staff and learners. Besides, I had to maintain good relationships with the school administrators, my gatekeepers at the school, and therefore avoided to ask questions about the protest in these interviews, as the consultation was ongoing; and because my PhD topic led me to privilege other aspects. I solely gathered other teachers’ views on the protest in informal conversations.

Being a White French woman in her mid-twenties, studying at a university in Paris, exacerbated the advantages and pitfalls associated with this co-teacher position. In such a racially segregated setting, my moves were especially visible, and this accentuated my reluctance to openly ask questions on the protest in interviews or when attending meetings. On the other hand, I had been welcomed without suspicion by the school administrators as an “innocent student” to conduct research and coteach at the school, while considered an asset and expert at the same time. The principal thought that my research would “assist” the school¹⁰ and the deputy principal was “happy to have two White people

⁸ The ninth and final year of compulsory schooling, learners are 15-16 years old.

⁹ Jens took this initiative as I had invited him to co-present with me at a seminar at the University of Columbia in April 2018 where I was visiting. As the time difference between Johannesburg and New York did not allow him to connect during a period, he gathered five learners, asked them a few questions, and filmed their responses. We screened this five-minute video, and I included it in the data analysed here.

¹⁰ Fieldnotes, 22/07/2017.

teaching” as this “diversity” is seen as a guarantee of school quality by the parents¹¹. The role of the association of Whiteness and quality education in informing family school choices is well documented in South Africa (Hunter, 2019), but the ways in which it affects relationships between ethnographers and school staff is less known (Bouyat and Robinson, forthcoming). Here, it enabled me to obtain meetings with the administrators to “give feedbacks” about the class discussions on the protest and opened productive opportunities to explore their perspectives, without compromising my relationship with these gatekeepers.

I complemented the collection of data on learners’ perspectives once I left the school. Beside the video made by Jens, I used WhatsApp to interview Mahlatse, the main instigator of the protest. I first attempted some months after the protest and failed several times: Mahlatse allegedly had no money for data, no WIFI access, or was affected by load-shedding. Encouraged by Jens, who obtained her new number from his little sister who was then attending the school, I tried again in November 2021, and she responded positively. Worried that I would face technical issues during a call, I sent her a list of questions and she replied with a ten-minute voice note. Fortunately, I was able to interview her for two and a half hours thereafter, allowing her to deeply develop her answers. With hindsight, it is unclear whether she had been unable or reluctant to take my calls in the past. She was perhaps afraid to talk about her key role in the mobilisation while she was still attending the school. Yet, in 2021, she was proud to share her experience and had at heart to “tell the story about what’s happening in township schools”. This is already testimony to the need to enrich the debates about this politicized issue in South Africa, with a perspective from a low-income school.

III) Opportunities and limits for the mobilisation caused by the dominant anti-racist framing of conflicts over the policing of learners’ hairstyles

To analyse how the conventional politicization of the policing of learners’ hairstyles both enabled and rapidly delegitimized the mobilisation at the Sowetan school, it is necessary to consider the protest alongside a series of mediatized events which occurred in other schools in and around Johannesburg, and other protest actions in the surroundings of the school during the holidays and as school restarted. I argue that, together, they constituted a political climate that was conducive to the protest; even if the ways in which it directly informed the mobilisation of the girls is unclear.

When schools reopened, two widely mediatized crises politicized the issue of racism at school. The first occurred in one of the most prestigious, historically Whites-only, private boys’ school of the country: St John’s (eastern Johannesburg). A teacher was found making repeated racist comments to Black learners, which led their parents to lodge formal complains, and the school to engage in an internal disciplinary process. The administrators took the teacher down from the leadership position he was occupying, but this was not considered a strong enough response by many members of the school community, which led the conflict to become publicized, and the teacher was eventually forced to resign (Masweneng, 2017). This coincided with a parents-initiated mobilisation to get the school to adopt an anti-racism policy, that the administration resisted, which further encouraged learners and parents to publicly denounce racist incidents at the school (Nuttall, 2017).

The second is a collective mobilisation of parents, learners and residents at Klipspruit-West High, a former Coloureds-only school located in a section of Soweto nearby the school under study, against the appointment of a new Black principal. The protesters claimed that the appointment was flawed, prompted by the nepotist intervention of the biggest teacher union *SADTU*, and that it would aggravate some Black teachers’ oppressive practices against Coloured learners (Jordaan, 2017b).

¹¹ Interview with the Deputy Principal, 05/09/2017.

Meanwhile, the Department, later supported by an investigation conducted by the *Human Rights Commission*, disqualified the protest as violent, infringing on the right to education, and “racially motivated” (Njilo, 2019). The school was shut down on the first day of the term, staff embarked on a go-slow, and violent interactions occurred the following week, with a bus set alight on August 3rd (Jordaan, 2017a) – the day prior to the girls’ protest.

These two crises were not referred to by the staff or learners of the Sowetan school when commenting on their own protest. Nonetheless, given the magnitude of media coverage and institutional responses that they provoked, they set the public problem of racism at school high on the Department of Education’s agenda, and forced the Gauteng Department of Education to rapidly respond to violent forms of protest targeting its school infrastructures. This may explain why the Department reacted swiftly to the girls’ mobilisation and immediately attempted to pacify the situation. The Department was also likely further encouraged to do so as the schools nearby had regularly been the site of protests, including a violent one some months before, where classrooms had been vandalised and the MEC for Education (the head of the provincial department of Education, Panyaza Lesufi) was forced to intervene (News24, 2016).

Two additional series of events may be more directly associated with the girls’ mobilisation. On the one hand, a wave of protests occurred in different parts of Soweto during the winter break, against electricity and water cuts (Ramothwala, 2017), which continued during the first week of term. They involved roadblocks and violent confrontations with the police and private security in charge of the protection of infrastructures. This directly affected the school community. Many learners did not come to school during the first week of the term due to the unavailability or the danger to use public transport when having to go through roadblocks¹², while the staff members who owned cars, alike Jens, drove long detours to come to school¹³. More tragically, a former learner, that Jens taught the previous year, was shot down during one of these protests by a security guard, as he was taking part in a shop looting. In one of Jens’ classes, a learner who witnessed his killing, decided to tell this story to his classmates when asked to share experiences from the holidays. Hence, the learners’ quotidian had just been immersed in these mobilisations, and some did take part in them. It therefore likely made the idea of staging a protest as a mean to express grievances germinate more easily in the girls’ heads. It may also be added that even though the school under study had earned a reputation of academic performance and peaceful management compared to nearby schools, it had been the site of political mobilisations as part of the school boycotts movement in Soweto in the 1980s (Glaser, 2016). Its staircases kept proud traces of this legacy with tagged slogans such as “Viva COSAS” or “Long live PASO”. There are thus deeper historical roots to the germination of this idea.

On the other hand, another event was more instrumental in encouraging the girls to stage a protest against their schools’ restrictions on hairstyles, in particular. It happened a week before in a private school in Kempton Park (Northeast of Johannesburg). On the first day of term, the aunt of a learner attending *Windsor House Academy* posted a picture on Facebook (see below) showing a group of eight Black girls who had been sent home by the Principal, an White Afrikaner women, because their hairstyles were deemed “unruly” and “unprofessional” (Ngwenya, 2017; News24, 2017). The girls all wore braided or plaited black hairpieces, tied back.

¹² Learners wrote this in argumentative essays on the topic of “violent protests” in our class later that term.

¹³ Fieldnotes, July 2017.



The post became viral and the MEC Lesufi announced that he will visit the school to follow up on “allegations of racism” (Mulanzi, 2017). This recycles the terms he used in response to the protest at *PHSG* a year before. Yet, after his visit, he changed his vocab in considering the conflict as a “Human Rights issue”. He was perhaps side-lining the previously used anti-racist framing, to avoid having to dedicate additional departmental resources to address the crisis, alike in *PHSG* where the Department commanded an independent investigation. He simply stated: “From now on there is no single learner that is going to be expelled from this school related to hair, henceforth”; and the school was given three months to review its code of conducts (Magwedze, 2017). The story was widely publicized, featuring in radio and television news report during that week, making the policing of learners’ hairstyles a hot topic again, one year after the protest at *PHSG*.

In fact, the officials of the Gauteng Department of Education came to intervene at least three times in schools to address crises around the policing of hairstyles during that month¹⁴.

Even though they did not name *Windsor House Academy*, both the learners and the staff referred to this event when commenting on the mobilisation at their school. During the class discussions I cofacilitated with the two teachers the week following the protest, learners mentioned it twice when asked “Why did a protest happen at the school on Friday the 4th of August?”:

“They wanted the MEC to hear their complains and fix the school, as he did in other schools.”

“Similar issues were reported on radio: it was the time to do the protest. Maybe the protesters heard about learners expelled because of hairstyles.” (Fieldnotes, 08/08/2017)

In addition, in four of the seven class discussions, the learners answered more broadly that the protesters were seeking to have the same rights on hairstyles that other schools were allowing, as the following quote illustrates:

“The learners protested so that we can be equal with other schools where hairstyles are allowed” (Fieldnotes, 07/08/2017)

This was similarly stated by a member of the RCL in a meeting with staff held the day of the protest:

“The strike is to change the policy. Why are ‘hippies’ [*hairpieces*] allowed in other schools? Everyone wants to do their hairstyle, but no one is informed!” (Fieldnotes, 04/08/2017)

¹⁴ The third school was located in Mamelodi, another section of Soweto, where a six-year old boy was called “gay” by a teacher because of his cornrows, which eventually led to her suspension (Mahlangu, 2017).

Some teachers and the school administration also saw the protest as being initiated by the mobilisations that happened in other schools, and by the mediatised interventions of the MEC in particular. Yet, from their perspective, rather than acknowledging the inequalities of learners' rights between the schools and the legitimacy of the protesters' claim in calling the SGB to address it, they considered that the learners did not have as serious motives as in the other schools to protest. They felt that the mobilisation had been opportunistically fomented by a small minority, and that there was no legitimate grievance to take action, as the following quotes by a Geography teacher and the Principal illustrate:

"The problem comes from what happened in another school, in the news. And the MEC had to go to that school. He made a statement which gave the wrong impression that hairstyles are allowed at school. (...) For me that is where the problem started. I thought that all schools were supposed to be proactive, from that time onwards. Maybe the best thing would have been to foresee that there would be some problems at the school following that statement and then call parents and revisit the policy on dress code. (...) That was a new wave coming, a new idea coming from other sources. (...) Because if you look only a few learners have glamorous hairstyles [*at this school*]! So you are making a deal of something that does not need that much attention." (Interview with a Geography teacher, 13/08/2017)

"It is about five percent of our learners who have this kind of hairstyles which are not accepted (...) So they must not have the influence over the entire school. But I want to acknowledge that the MEC's statement was wrongly interpreted by our learners. Because if the MEC would come to our school, he would want to know what sparked the strike. But now in our school there is no learner who has been sent off because of hairstyle, there is no teacher or an adult who has been cutting a learner's hair, which would be a violation. No, the strike did not emerge from that! It is something that was just planned to happen. (...) The learners just had this basic thinking: in other schools it is allowed." (Discussion following my feedback presentation on the class discussions on the protest with the Principal, 17/08/2017)

More specifically, the Principal discarded the seriousness of the mobilisation as it was not attempting to address a "racial discrimination":

"In that school there was a racial discrimination because Black children had these afro hair and they were made to cut them. The MEC was commenting about it because he was annoyed by the racial discrimination as White learners can wear their natural long hair (...) But in our position as a school, there is no racial discrimination."

This interpretation was shared by the Deputy Principal:

"The MEC's intervention in the other school, it was basically about racism. So our learners interpreted it the wrong way around, as if hairpieces are allowed in all schools. But it was different, it was about racism there." (Discussion following my feedback presentation on the class discussions on the protest with the Deputy Principal, 05/09/2017)

It is likely that the Principal was referring to the protest at *PHSG* – where the mediatisation foregrounded the afro of Zulaikha Patel, while the Deputy Principal was referring to the incident at *Windsor House Academy* – where braids became contentious. Nevertheless, in both cases the dominant anti-racist framing of conflicts over the policing of learners' hairstyles was considered to not apply to the Sowetan school, and therefore learners to not have as serious reasons to protest.

Assuming that “there is no racism” at the Sowetan school, simply based on the fact that the school has always and continues to accommodate almost exclusively Black learners and staff, is of course unsatisfactory. When it came to the policing of learners’ hairstyles, an expression of it was the undefined use of the term “ethnic hair” to describe the hairstyles allowed for girls (see extracts in annexe):

“Ethnic hair allowed provided it is neat and tied up.” (Code of conducts, version April 2018)

The vocab is not only problematic as it uses a colonial language, it is also very blurry. As such, it looks like a copy-pasted regulation from a formerly Whites-only school, where the SGB would have clumsily attempted to make the policy more inclusive towards Black learners, while adopting an essentialist approach to Black identity, in similar ways described by Carter (2012). Yet, what is important to underline is that the contention over the policing of hairstyles at the school was not politicized as anti-racist politics.

This is also true from the perspective of learners. In the class discussions, racial dimensions were not mentioned when discussing reasons for the protest. One reference was nonetheless made to Whiteness when we asked learners to list the “negative and positive points” associated with allowing hairpieces and cuts at school. In one class, a learner suggested to list as a positive point that “Learners will be able to look alike White people”. However, when learners voted individually to select the two most important negative and positive points from these lists, this point was only chosen twice, among the 240 voters (see the tables below).

Moreover, Mahlatse emphasized multiple times in the interview the differences between the mobilisations in “multiracial schools” and “Black schools” or “townships”. She acknowledged that one of the motivations for the protest was to seek more equality between schools, but insisted that the learners of her school could not make the same demands, based on the observations she had made in the “multiracial” school where her mother taught:

“All the time there is this comparison between our schools and multiracial schools. (...) I think that Panyaza Lesufi going to *Pretoria Girls* has set more voice and more awe to other multiracial schools than to local schools. Because in multiracial schools there are certain demands that learners can make, and the school can be quick to change that. But we, as a Black school, can’t make these demands. (...) In multiracial school, the moment you raise your voice on a learner, especially in White, in mixed multiracial schools, you are in trouble. (...) I noticed this in my Mom’s school. The rules are so strict for the teachers. But in townships, the rules are strict for the learners. In the multiracial schools, the learners are able to stand for themselves without needing a RCL to stand up for them. But in townships, (...) they are taught they should keep quiet.” (Phone interview with Mahlatse, 11/11/2021)

When I prompted her to comment and compare on the racial dimensions of the mobilisations, I discovered that she had not even drawn clear links between the protest at *PHSG* and the protest at her school. Her response reveals that she did not adopt an anti-racist framing:

“Jeanne: When I asked you a question about the differences between the protest at your school and at Pretoria Girls, I expected you to mention that in Pretoria the girls were saying that the rules on hairstyles were racist, that it was a problem about racism at the school, but you did not in the voicenote...”

Mahlatse: Yes! I wanted to mention that! (...) I had to go on the internet to remind myself of that story, because I didn’t get the full story, and I didn’t remember well. For me to answer that question, I had to go to the article. They mentioned something that whenever the girls

did an Afro, they would be called monkeys, say that they have a nest in their hair... But in our school, we are not multiracial, it's just Blacks.

Jeanne: Would you say that in your school in was not at all about racism?

Mahlatse: It was about power. It was not about racism."

Her quotes further reveal that there were both connections and disconnections between the various protests and incidents politicizing conflicts over the policing of learners' hairstyles elsewhere, and the mobilisation at the Sowetan school. The protest may adequately be considered integral to a broader learners' led movement aimed at relaxing schools' restrictions on hairstyles. The mediatization of the conflicts in multiracial schools, and the contentious political climate surrounding the Sowetan school, all contributed to providing a window of opportunity for the protest – in particular, to catch the Department's attention. Yet, the dominant anti-racist framing of these conflicts was not adopted by the protesters and delegitimized the protest from the perspective of the school administrators. Instead, Mahlatse stresses that the mobilisation at her school was "about power". The rest of the quotes suggests that she means a renegotiation of authority between the learners and the staff at the school.

It is indeed the prevalent contention that may be identified among the ordinary forms of politicization of the policing of learners' hairstyle which occurred at the school at the time, but not the only one.

IV) Unpacking multiple contentions over the policing of learners' hairstyles in Soweto through exploring ordinary politicization

It is necessary to stress that the contentions that led to the mobilisation or took shape during it and the consultation that followed were multiple, and not clearly stated. The protesters never handled a list of grievances, the SGB meetings were held behind closed doors, and there were no formal discussions involving all the learners of the school, or at least those who took part in the protest.

A) Challenging authoritarian practices, renegotiating authority between staff and learners

Mahlatse stated that what motivated her to initiate a collective conversation among learners on the policing of hairstyles at the school was the recurrent, intrusive, and harmful disciplining practices of the school staff targeting their hairstyles. Mahlatse submitted that the event that shook her, and encouraged her to "talk to the other learners" was when a friend approached her saying that a teacher had cut his hair, and requested her to do something about it, as the President of the RCL:

"The protest happened because there was a violation of learners. The staff members would call out learners at the school gate because they would have a certain hairstyle. (...) Many learners would be bullied by staff members (...) Many learners would be sent back home if they would come with a certain hairstyle. (...) What drew it to my attention is when one of my classmates, a boy, was cut off his hair by a staff member with a hair trimmer. (...) Without the boy saying 'Yes, I agree that you should do that' [initiate a collective reaction by learners], I would not have understood the violation he had suffered. His voice was being oppressed." (Mahlatse, WhatsApp voice note, 11/11/2021)

It resonated with her own experiences of being reprimanded by a teacher at assembly:

"When I was in my lower Grades (...) I did a haircut, not plaiting like other ladies. I was at the assembly. This is where you would be opposed by certain staff members because that's where everybody is, and the hairstyles and uniforms are being inspected. (...) This guy who

has a certain position in the staff came to me and asked about my hairstyle. I remember I did not give him any response and focused on the assembly. Because on guys you do the trimming, the drawings, the lines. But they didn't want us, girls, to draw lines. (...) If I was a victim as well, I had to stand for my fellow learners." (Phone interview with Mahlatse, 11/11/2021)

I did indeed witness such intrusive inspections of learners' appearances at the gate and as learners arrive to the assembly by some members of the school staff, at this school and in other low-income schools where I conducted my doctoral research fieldwork. Learners were even asked to pull up their trousers to check if the colour of their socks were matching and allowed by the dress code, and some were turned away. Forced hair trimming by a teacher is a more extreme practice, that was only mentioned by Mahlatse at this school, but is recurrently reported in the news and condemned by the Department (Lippke, 2018; Mlambo, 2021).

According to Mahlatse, such practices had been going on for many years and learners had been silent about these humiliations, unlike what the quote of the Principal above suggests. She stressed that they were performed only by a minority, but tacitly endorsed by other staff members:

"In the school, fear was instilled within us. The learners who were affected, they did not feel they had the authority or the confidence to voice it to school members. (...) There were only two members of the school staff who were particularly problematic. (...) But most teachers were so strict! They would not allow or take note of the concerns of learners, of what they are going through. (...) Hairstyles did not matter, they just saw it as a waste of time. They were sending a very strong message to the learners that this is just something light. (...) Many learners were frustrated because this was going on and on. (...) I think that the protest was mainly about intimidation."

Her testimony is corroborated by the class discussions. In three of the classes, the learners named the same teacher who they considered particularly strict, and they described such practices also in informal discussions on the day of the protest:

"Teachers are too strict about hairstyles", "Teachers treat learners like rubbish because of their hairstyles" (Fieldnotes on class discussions, 08/08/2017)

"Mam S. is too strict. She kicks learners out of her class because of their hairstyles. That is why the protest happened." (Fieldnote of informal interaction with a learner, 04/08/2017)

In the emergency meetings that followed the protest, the RCL members explained that they had risen this issue to the attention of the Principal before the winter break, telling him that "learners have been expelled from class because of their hairstyles" and that "some girls want to be allowed to wear hairpieces". The Principal had apparently promised to organise a meeting with the SGB to discuss the matter but did not do so as the school reopened "because it's exam time"¹⁵. This was not confirmed by the Principal in our discussion. However, it is likely that such engagements had happened, informally, as it was mentioned in all class discussions that learners protested "because they wanted to be heard". In one class, the learners added that "the school management did not respond to the complains many times". I suggest that the Principal had probably not responded to the learners both because he did not consider it a priority – especially to start a policy amendment process; and because confronting staff members about their disciplining practices is particularly challenging. As Howard Becker (1953) puts it, the school staff tends to not contravene each other's disciplining practices to not "lose face" in front of the learners and parents, and to maintain the

¹⁵ Fieldnotes, 04/08/2017.

“authority system” of a school. This might lead to the tacit endorsement of slippery or harmful practices.

Mahlatse explained that in order to force the school administration to consider the learners’ grievances about the policing of hairstyles seriously, they had to stage a protest, to disrupt schooling:

“Protesting would send out a strong message to these staff members oppressing us, and to the school governing body.” (Mahlatse, WhatsApp voice note, 11/11/2021)

Indeed, the staging of the protest was an impressive, even if chaotic, demonstration of power by a group of girls, as the reconstitution below attests:

7.15 am.

As I enter the classroom, Jens and Serafina approach me, excited: “The girls will protest about hairstyles this morning!” Some learners had informed them that the Grade 12 girls met on Wednesday and decided so. I am surprised. Based on my experience of blockades in French schools and universities, protesters tend to barre access from the early morning, but there was no one at the gate. We decide to attend the assembly, see what is happening.

7.30 am to 8.30 am.

Hundreds of learners are standing in blue and white uniforms, orderly lined up by Grade and waiting for the pastor to finish his preaching. He is barely audible, speaking from the balcony without loudspeakers. Nothing seems to be brewing. Only the Deputy Principal looks tensed and does rapid rounds. The Principal is absent, allegedly attending some funerals. Today he will not address the learners about the need to improve their pass rates or the imperative to make informed career choices as he usually does.

As soon as the last “Amen” is said, a group of older girls starts whistling and yelling “Ayi-Ayi!” Within seconds, they form a compact jumping and dancing mass: the protest has begun. Some girls are proudly brandishing a pack of hair extensions. The Deputy Principal is the only one attempting to chase them. He is holding his folders with a disturbingly confident attitude, as if he has everything under control. The teachers are carefully observing from a distance, this seemingly undisciplined volatile mass of young women. The dancing lasts for a few minutes, and as he walks towards them, they quickly encircle him. Hundreds of girls take over, discovering how easily they are winning the courtyard battle. Jens, Serafina and myself are in awe of this demonstration of power.

They then suddenly run towards the gate and are soon outside. Jens is now worried: “I should check on them, it will be dangerous if they try to block the highway.” He goes, while I witness the passivity of learners rooming around the schoolyard, and the staff apparently not knowing what to do. He returns some minutes later: “They went to the neighbouring schools and the district (of the Gauteng Department of Education). The gates were locked so they dispersed.”

Some learners slowly return. No teaching can happen anymore today. “The learners have won a longer weekend” as the school security guard cynically puts it. A policeman discreetly leaves the school administration’s building. Things did not appear so unruly to necessitate his team’s intervention. The Deputy Principal calls for an urgent staff meeting. (Fieldnotes, 04/08/2017)

The success of the protest relied on catching the staff unprepared (most teachers heard about it on that morning) and an ingenious and ironic twist. Indeed, instead of picketing at the gate, which would have necessitated to come in bigger numbers and possibly to resist to the police, the

protestors hijacked the only configuration where all learners gather in one group at school: the assembly. In so doing, they subverted an institutional ritual partly used as a disciplining device to screen learners' appearances, and they turned it into a tool to destabilise the staff, and a platform to express their grievances to the whole school community.

The protesters were also addressing them beyond the school community. When they left the schoolgrounds, Mahlatse explained that they were trying to get the support of learners in the nearby schools to form a bigger protest, in order to demonstrate more collective power:

"If it would have been a break time, surely it was going to be the biggest protest! (...) We were just trying to get support, to get the learners to stand with us, to cry with us, so that we can be heard." (Phone interview with Mahlatse, 11/11/2021)

What is more, in disrupting schooling and interpellating the district, she added that the learners were trying to provoke the Department to put hierarchical pressure to force their SGB to address their concerns, which according to her could not be achieved through more peaceful means:

"We wanted the district officials to tell them [*SGB members*] that this was not right. Because it was going to be a process if I was going to call the district and tell them about the matter. They wouldn't have taken it seriously. What they would take seriously is something in action. It was the school members versus the learners. If we had just sat down with the school staff members, they would just have oppressed us, not seen anything wrong with the hairstyles. (...) Because if it was the district members telling the teachers, as they are on a higher position, then they would understand that this is how it is going to happen."

Taken together, all these elements thus reveal that one of the central contentions is that the policing of hairstyles had been experienced as a site of authoritarian practices by a minority of staff members at the school by the learners, and that despite being repeatedly raised through peaceful channels, these grievances were never taken seriously. Challenging the policing of hairstyles therefore became ordinarily politicized as a way to renegotiate authority between staff and learners. This is well captured in the following quote of Mahlatse:

"That thing that there should be a difference between a learner and a teacher, it was one of the most important reasons for the protest. That the appearance shows like... a certain power... them having power over us."

But there was more to it. As the brandishing of hairpieces by the protesting girls, and the statement made by RCL members in the emergency meeting underlines: the protesters were also longing for new rights, for the formal relaxing of the school restrictions on hairstyles.

B) Relaxing the school's restriction on hairstyles to gain new rights and dignity

It is important nonetheless to underline that asking for an amendment of the dress code was not formally raised by the protesters. The only intelligible demand that came out of the protest was that "some girls want to be allowed to wear hairpieces". This is also the main claim that the learners mentioned in all the class discussions. Nevertheless, in the week that followed the protest, the demand was redefined, through the joint action of the Department officials, the school administrators, and the RCL, as a demand for the inclusion of multiple new hairstyles, for both boys and girls, in the code of conducts.

In the class discussions, we decided to name "hairpieces and cuts" in order to be inclusive of both girls and boys. In hindsight this was perhaps a problematic choice, but we did not want to engage at length in discussions on various hairstyles, as we felt that the learners' contentions were not

attached to specific ones, but to the policing of hairstyles more broadly at the school. In asking the learner to list the positive and negative points associated with allowing these two hairstyles, we were trying to ask them more broadly what relaxing the regulations on hairstyles would bring. Their answers and votes on the positive points are synthesized in the two tables below.

TABLE 1: Positive points associated with allowing hairpieces and cuts discussed in class (period 1, seven classes).

Themes	Total of mentions	Positive points	Mentions	Disagreements
Feeling comfortable	8	The hairstyles boost learners' self-esteem. The hairstyles enhance learners' beauty.	5 3	1 -
Practicality	6	The hairstyles are easier to do and to maintain. The hairstyles are quicker to do.	4 2	- -
Learners-staff relationships	5	Allowing these hairstyles will make learners and teachers more equal. Allowing these hairstyles will prevent further protests.	3 2	- 1
School comparisons	5	Learners will be equal with other schools allowing these hairstyles. It will attract more learners to the school.	4 1	- 1
Personality	3	The hairstyles enable learners to express their personalities/talents	3	-
Economic aspects	3	The hairstyles are cheaper.	3	-
Respectability	3	The hairstyles are neater.	3	-
Sexualisation	3	The hairstyles make boys/girls more attractive. Teenage pregnancy will drop because girls feel more self-confident.	2 1	2 -
Freedom of expression	1	The hairstyles enable learners to express cultural/religious identities.	1	-
Academic aspects	1	It will prevent learners missing school because of their hairstyles.	1	-
Racial aspects	1	Learners will be able to look like White people.	1	-

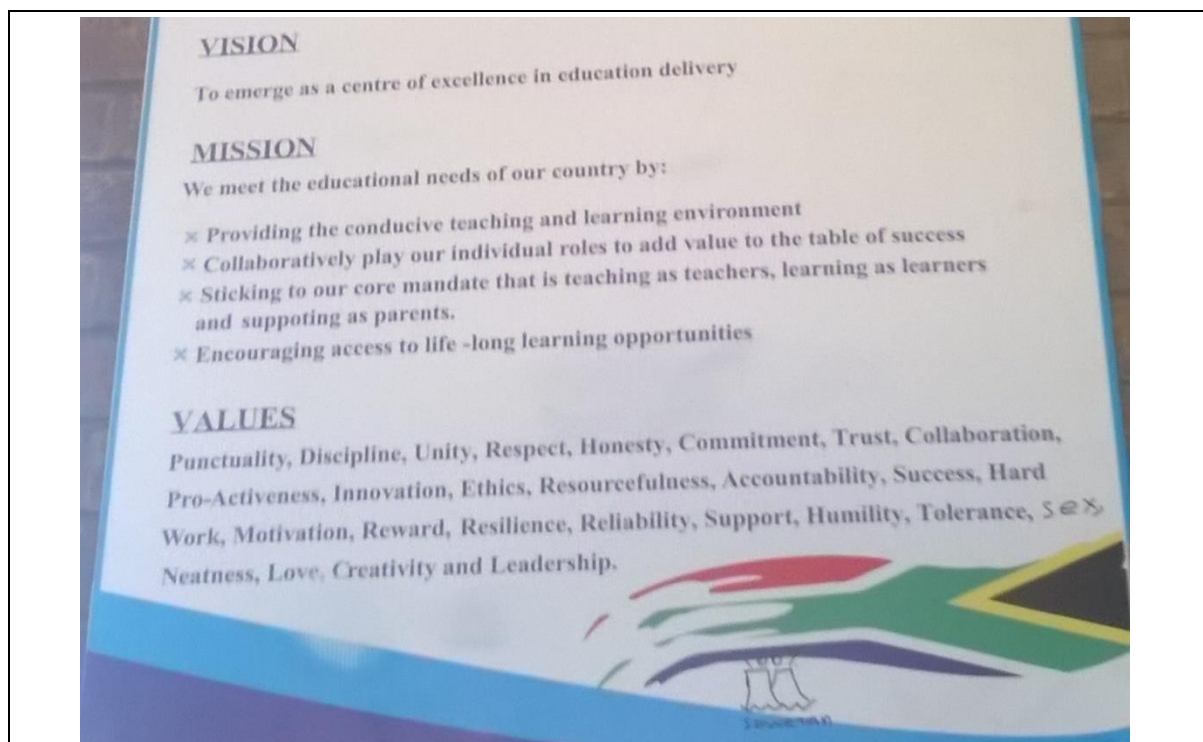
TABLE 2: Learners' votes on the list of positive points associated with allowing hair-pieces and cuts (period 2, 239 votes).

Themes	Voting share	List of positive points used for the vote
Feeling comfortable inside and outside	48%	1) Learners can be beautiful. 2) Learners can have more confidence. 3) Learners can feel more comfortable.
Personality and creativity	11%	4) Learners can have a change to their hair. 5) Learners can show their talents with hair.
Racial aspects	1%	6) Learners can have hair like White people.
Respectability	7%	7) Learners can have neater hair.
Practicality	9%	8) Learners can prepare their hair quicker.
Economic aspects	3%	9) The hairstyles are cheaper.
Sexualisation	8%	10) Girls can attract boys with their hairstyles. 11) Teenage pregnancy will drop.
Learners-staff relationships – authority	2%	12) Learners can look alike teachers.
Comparison with other schools	4%	13) Learners can be equal with other schools.
Right to freedom of expression	4%	14) Learners can respect traditions and beliefs.
Learners-staff relationships – disruptions	4%	15) It prevents more protests about hair at school.

As the tables reveal, the learners primarily emphasised that allowing the new hairstyles would enable them to feel “comfortable”, “confident” and “look beautiful” and “cool”. This represented half of the votes. The learners insisted on tangible gains they would win from relaxing the policy. This is confirmed by the multiple references to practicability (the hairstyles are described as easier and quicker to prepare) and the ability to express “personality” or “talent” through hairstyles – representing a fifth of the votes.

These discourses may not at first sight appear too clearly connected to the democratisation of the school. Yet, the learners' insistence on “self-esteem” (five mentions) suggests that the policing of hairstyles is not worth rebelling against merely because it constrains looks, but rather because it affects how learners view themselves, as the polysemic expression “feeling comfortable” reveals. Hence, the learners implicitly frame the school's restrictions on hairstyles as an infringement on their dignity. Furthermore, their recurrent claim that the hairstyles are “neat” (3 mentions) reveals that the contention lies in preventing learners to reconcile their own perception of beauty and respectability with the one upheld by the school. The term neatness is often used to qualify authorized hairstyles in a code of conduct. At the Sowetan school, neatness is listed among the “school values”, materialised in big signs (which may be turned into ridicule as the addition of “sex” shows, see below). Thus, the learners' were implicitly opposing the school's restrictive and harmful conception of neatness.

Picture of the school's vision, mission and values sign (taken by author)



This gap between the learners' and a school's understandings of neatness may be typical of the schooling institution, which tends to be slow to adapt to generational changes on aesthetics, as it has been argued for uniforms (Meadmore and Symes, 1996; Tamura, 2007; Stephenson, 2016). Yet, this gap is exacerbated in the post-apartheid schooling institution, and in former Bantu schools in particular, as both staff and parents have been socialised to authoritarian forms of schooling (Morrell, 2001) which present a radical discrepancy with the "born-free" learners' aspirations – including their experimentations with looks (Dolby, 2001; Carter, 2012), as expressed by Mahlatse when she compared "Black" and "multiracial" schools. This tension is more harmful when it comes to policing hairstyles compared to uniforms, jewellery, or make-up as hair is a body part; and constraining learners' hairstyles has also effects outside school time (Free State High Court, 2013).

Even if the learners acknowledged a range of negative consequences that may arise with relaxing the policy on hairstyles – most notably, material dimensions: the inability to afford hairstyles, the conflicts among learners that competition over hairstyles will provoke – they massively voted (at 81%) for "allowing hairpieces and cuts at school".

Thus, the contentions that centrally underpinned the mobilisation at the school derived from the lack of democracy at the school. The school community was allowing and tacitly endorsing authoritarian intrusive practices of policing hairstyles, was maintaining stricter restrictions on hairstyles than the surrounding schools and more privileged schools, which infringed on the learners' dignity. Hence, it became an important site of conflict, which was also easier to mobilise against as it was already conventionally politicized as a public problem, and a particularly hot topic at the time.

Yet, there still is more to it. When considering the range of discourses about the sexualisation of the girls' bodies that the mobilisation provoked, by both learners, staff and parents; and the stringent opposition of the parents to relax the hairstyle policy of the school; these two elements appear as additional, unstated, contentions that were at stake in the conflict over the policing of hairstyles at the school.

C) Unstated contentions: the sexualisation of girls' bodies, and parents' social conservatism

It should be underlined that, even though allegedly very few boys attending the learners' gathering called by Mahlatse during which the decision to decision was taken to organise a protest, and its staging was exclusively performed by girls, the protesters never expressed it as a "girls' mobilisation" aimed at addressing issues that affect them more than the boys; and nor was it perceived as such by the rest of the learners.

When the learners listed and voted on the negative points that would be associated with the relaxing of the policy on hairstyles in class discussions, the sexualisation of learners, and of girls specifically, featured prominently, as the tables below reveal.

TABLE 3: Negative points associated with allowing hair-pieces and cuts discussed in class (period 1, seven classes).

Themes	Negative points	Mentions	Disagreements
Sexualisation and learners-staff relationships	Learners might date teachers as girls/boys become more attractive. Some learners might be expelled because of dating due to hairstyles.	4 1	1 -
Sexualisation and economic aspects	Some girls will get blessers or become prostitutes to pay for the hairstyles. Teenage pregnancy will rise because girls will seek blessers.	3 1	2 -
Sexualisation (other)	Teenage pregnancy will rise because girls become more attractive. Girls will be at higher risk to be kidnapped as they become more attractive. Girls will be at higher risk to be raped as they become more attractive.	2 2 1	1 - -
Total on sexualisation: 14, 4 disagreements			
Economic aspects and conflicts among learners	There will be competition, jealousy, mockery among learners because they cannot afford the hairstyles.	4	-
Economic and academic aspects	Some learners will miss school because they cannot afford the hairstyles.	2	1
Economic aspects and hygiene	Some learners will not be able to pay the products to clean the braids.	1	-
Economic (other)	Some learners will not afford the hairstyles and feel marginalised. Some learners will steal money to pay for the hairstyles.	1 1	- -
Total on economic aspects: 13, 3 disagreements			
Conflicts among learners (other)	There will be competition among learners (no explicit reference to money). There will be physical fights among learners.	3 2	- -
Total on conflicts among learners: 9			
Learners-staff relationships (other)	Teachers will be harsher because they consider learners' hairstyles nasty Teachers will become jealous of learners because if they do nice hairstyles. There will be no difference between learners and teachers.	1 1 1	- - -
Total on learners-school staff relationships: 8, 1 disagreement			
Respectability	The hairstyles will look inappropriate or will not match the uniforms. The learners will not look different to other young people.	2 1	2 -
Academic (other)	The new hairstyles will distract learners from schoolwork or in class.	5	1
Total on academic aspects: 10, 3 disagreement			
Hygiene (other)	The school will be more messy with hair-pieces falling. It will bring more sicknesses as the hairstyles are harder to clean.	1 2	- -
Total on hygiene: 4			

TABLE 4: Votes on the list of negative points associated with allowing hair-pieces and cuts (period 2, 240 votes).

Themes	% of votes	List of negative points used for the vote
Academic aspects	13%	1) Learners will be distracted at school because of their hair.
Conflicts among learners and economic aspects	20%	2) There will be competition, jealousy, conflict among learners on hairstyles, some might not afford them.
Learners-staff relationships – authority	3%	3) Learners will copy teachers, it is disrespectful.
Learners-staff relationships and Sexualisation	21%	4) Teachers will be jealous of learners because they have more style or become more attractive to male teachers. 5) Boys will attract student teachers with their cuts.
Learners-staff relationships – disciplining	2%	6) Teachers will punish learners whose hair they judge nasty.
Sexualisation and economic aspects	16%	7) Some girls will get blessers to pay for the hairstyles.
Sexualisation (other)	11%	8) Girls could be kidnapped because of their nice hairstyles.
Hygiene	6%	9) The school will get messy with the hair-pieces that fall. 10) The hair can become greasy if learners keep hair-pieces.
Respectability	8%	11) Learners and other young people will look alike. 12) Hairstyles will look inappropriate in school competition.

Points referring to the sexualisation of learners were mentioned fourteen times and present in half of the votes. The most mentioned was the risk to encourage sex between learners and teachers and it represented one fifth of the votes. Previous research has shown that sex between male teachers and female learners is far from exceptional in low-income schools in South Africa (Prinsloo, 2006; Bhana, 2012). The risk was taken seriously by both learners and staff. During a staff meeting, the Principal made a bad taste “joke” about it. It was six weeks after the protest, as the school was engulfed in another crisis. Within two weeks, a sixteen years-old girl had given birth at school (she was arriving to the term of her pregnancy as she was writing her Matric examinations) and a thirteen years-old girl had died at home as a result of an early pregnancy. As the Principal was announcing her death and an audit on pregnancies by the Department, he added:

“Our children must keep themselves, so we keep them in Grade 12 as children. Luckily, teachers, you are not the fathers of these children. Because it happened in other schools. Let us keep ourselves clean and away from bad practices. We can go hunting somewhere else! (Laughs among the teachers). Let us just read about it in the news.” (Fieldnotes, 20/09/2017)

This reveals the pervasiveness of sex between male teachers and female learners and the challenges girls may face to denounce it. The Principal constructed them both as preys and co-instigators due to their supposing flirtatious behaviours. Considering this highly patriarchal context, the learners’ association between allowing the hairstyles and encouraging sex between learners and teachers can be interpreted both as an interiorisation of these discourses and an implicit denunciation of this sexual violence. This also applies to the points dealing with the risks to push girls to seek “blessers” (men who will financially support them in exchange of sexual services, mentioned four times), of rising teenage pregnancy, and of kidnapping or raping of girls (each mentioned three times).

Yet, the girls’ efforts to relax the policy on hairstyles was hardly interpreted by the learners as a way to challenge the sexualisation of girls. In fact, the learners had different opinions whether the girls were the object of stricter practices of policing hairstyles than the boys. This was not explicitly stated in the class discussions, but the boy who took part in the focus group emphasized that the staff was more lenient towards boys than girls, even months after the protest:

“Neo: They changed the code of conduct but still they only allowed boys to do haircuts, but girls don’t have to come with the long hairpieces. Nothing has changed ever since. Just one percent change of the rules.” (Focus group with Grade 10 learners, 26/04/2018)

On her side, Mahlatse considered that both boys and girls were being intrusively oppressed by the adults because of their hairstyles. She remarked that relatively less boys than girls were doing special hairstyles and were less visible – which gives the impression that girls were more targeted. She added that girls had more confidence and capacity to voice their concerns, while boys were more afraid. For her, this is why the protest was led by the girls, without championing girls’ rights specifically. She only marginally implied that girls were more sexualised than boys through their hairstyles:

“I think a lot of boys were not doing the hairstyles. The ladies were the ones doing the hairstyles. And having hairpieces attracts much more attention than a haircut. (...) Because the girls are always on sexuality more than the boys. But it affects boys as well. There was a male member of the school staff who was always giving attention to what the boys were doing with their hair. (...) Boys are not quite expressive, not like ladies, like girls. That’s why I was able to recruit mainly from the girls (...) The boys had many fears. Boys were always punished by one of the staff members. (...) Boys have not been really a part of that support, even though they shared and felt our frustration when we did the picketing. (...) If we had had a male president, I don't think that he would have taken the cries and concerns of the ladies’ aspect.” (Mahlatse, interview, 11/11/2021)

Hence, the protest was hardly framed and experienced as a mobilisation against sexism – even though its main effect was to liberate girls – I will return to it.

When considering the comments on the protest by the school staff however, it becomes clear that the control of the hairstyles of the girls was linked to the intense sexualisation of their bodies – and this did not apply to boys. The Principal expressed that he was in favour of maintaining rather strict restrictions on hairstyles as a means to prevent prostitution. He contested the learners’ main set of justifications to allow hairpieces and cuts at school in emphasizing that the poorest learners’ dignity and self-esteem would be lowered if they could not afford these new hairstyles, as they could be mocked by their classmates. Alike in the class discussions, his denunciation of these economic barriers was articulated with a sexualisation of girls:

“That was our thinking [*as staff*]: let there be equality among learners. We cannot have learners looking more glamorous than those coming from poor families. Learners would look more uniform if they have a common, acceptable, simple hairstyle that can be afforded and done even by a poor child. (...) When we look at it, it might lead to learners wanting to have so-called blessers, where a young girl will date an older working-class man so that he can sponsor the hairstyle.” (Discussion following my feedback presentation on the class discussions on the protest with the Principal, 17/08/2017)

He was more explicitly sexualising the girls than the learners did in the class discussions. The risk of kidnapping was only marginally mentioned by the learners, but he insisted on this point, and considered the restrictions on hairstyles as preventing sexual violence, pregnancy, and abduction:

“On weekends our learners are not in school uniform, and it is part of their safety when they wear their natural hair. (...) But if they are wearing these fancy hairstyles some of them now look like adults (...) Then they are potentially at high risk for males to propose love to them and for them to be tempted to fall in such a trap. Where there are more serious problems,

they may be victims of kidnappers who will just see these sexy looking young girl who is really stylish, even from the hair. (...) That is going to happen at a high level!"

While his statements further reveal his sexist thinking – that one prevents sexual violence and prostitution among the girls through controlling female bodies – they were also informed by his experiences of seeing older female learners dropping out of school once they had a “blesser” or were pregnant.

Overall, what these discourses reveal is the constitution of a moral panic around the relaxing of the hairstyles of girls specifically. Even if challenging the sexualisation of girls was not explicitly stated as a contention informing the mobilisation, I submit that it certainly explains the fact that the mobilisation was spearheaded by the girls, as they are more deeply affected by the policing of hairstyles at their school.

Another unstated contention that came to the surface during the consultation that followed the protest is the social conservatism of the parents. Indeed, when the parents got invited to the school to discuss the list of hairstyles shortlisted by the SGB, they appear to be even more conservative than the school staff.

The parents who spoke in that meeting, mainly men, were strongly opposed to relaxing the policy on hairstyles. They named the same negative points associated with allowing hairpieces and cuts identified by learners. They considered that doing hairstyles would be a “distraction” from schoolwork, that girls would be at risk to “get sugar daddies” or “get kidnapped”, and that hairpieces would be too expensive.

But what concerned or angered them most fundamentally was the staging of a protest. They did not want “to be ruled by their children” and they accused the Department to “put their children in front of them”. They stressed that the teachers’ authority was being challenged, that the learners had become too “unruly”, and a father spoke vehemently in favour of re-establishing corporal punishment at school – and his intervention received applause.

After twenty minutes of self-organised discussion, the Principal addressed them and explained that he “called the meeting to discuss why the kids went out of order” and to consult them about the school’s policy on hairstyles. Announcing the matters in that order again reveals that the fundamental concern of both the staff and the parents was to prevent another disruption of schooling, rather than to address the learners’ grievances. Some parents then reacted by repeating similar statements. However, Mahlatse’s mother remarked that: “allowing hairpieces will not make the school more dysfunctional as these hairstyles are allowed in ex-model C schools [*schools formerly reserved to Whites*], and the learners perform well.”

This supportive intervention paved the way for Mahlatse to address the parents. It was a highly challenging exercise to defend the learners’ claims for such a hostile audience. The parents were not aware that Mahlatse was the main instigator of the protest, she was solely identified as the “responsible” President of the RCL. She first attempted to reinsure the parents that their authority was not being challenged, before arguing in favour of relaxing the policy on hairstyles:

“We as learners will not try to go against you. We follow the protocol, which is to consult with the SGB and the parents to amend the policy. (...) The learners say that they want to look more beautiful to have more confidence at school, and also to perform better academically. You can either encourage us or let us down.”

A few parents seemed to silently agree, but those who spoke kept firmly opposing any relaxation. They solely admitted that some families may have different views: “If you don’t agree with the majority, send your children somewhere else”, “Here we don’t agree with hairpieces”. The Principal then started listing hairstyles and asked the parents if they were for or against. The inclusion or exclusion of new hairstyles was made based on the relative levels of supportive or oppositional noise made by the parents; and those opposing were typically more vocal.

The unfolding of the meeting thus reveals that the majority of parents were opposed to relaxing the rules, and interpreted the protest as a broader infringement on the authority of the adults in the school community. It suggests that, for the learners, the school is a challenging place to democratize, but perhaps an easier one than the households where they grow up. This was also emphasized by Mahlatse:

“The learners did not take any action on the parents, because the parents would be like: ‘No why are you doing these hairstyles?’ (...) Parents would obviously oppose the learners’ concerns. (...) Black parents are very very strict! (...) One mistake, the parent will either shout at you or will take a certain punishment upon you. (...) In townships, our voices are not taken seriously. The control over learners... the teachers in our schools they like to act like parents at our homes. To impose more control on behaviour, on what we should do.” (Phone interview with Mahlatse, 11/11/2021)

It could therefore be the case that the learners’ mobilisation was also a way to force the parents, grandparents, aunties or guardians (only half of the learners at this school were staying with both their parents) to have a conversation about the policing of their hairstyles, within the school arena where have the support of other learners, some parents and staff members, and from the rights-based discourse of the Department.

And it seems that this strategy was rather successful, as the learners effectively succeeded in democratising the policing of learners’ hairstyles at their school in their community. This was enabled by formally playing by the rules of the consultative process that unfolded at the school, while subtly continuing to subvert them.

Conclusion – Depoliticizing as politicizing: how learners articulated conflictualization and pacification to democratize the policing of hairstyles

The consultative process that unfolded at the school matched the definition of political processes of depoliticization very well, allying technicisation and pacification strategies to attempt to empty out the contentious nature of the grievances at stake in the conflict over the policing of learners’ hairstyles. The complex, often unstated, claims of the protesting learners were simply reduced to demanding the inclusion of new list of hairstyles in the code of conduct – while the older version of the code of conduct was never circulated to the learners nor the staff. In fact, Jens and Serafina were unable to obtain when we asked for it to use it for our class discussions. The process of gathering the list of hairstyles felt designed to make the learners’ claim appear ridiculous: the RCL members went around all classrooms to compile an endless list of increasingly eccentric hairstyles that learners could suggest to add to the code of conduct, and they had to describe them to the SGB members (“What’s a mohawk ?”) for it to shortlist those that would be presented to the parents. Mahlatse experienced it as humiliating (“we felt embarrassed and belittled, they were busy laughing at us”). The mockery of election that happened during the parents meeting further confirmed this.

Meanwhile, as the RCL members facilitated these processes, an increasing number of girls started coming to school with braided and plaited hairstyles, using black extensions, sometimes decorated

with silvery beads. More boys started to have soccer style cuts, with lines on the sides. And the staff became in fact paralyzed by the mixture of official obedience and covered disobedience displayed by the learners. The administrators advised in staff meetings to “not be too harsh on hairstyles and uniforms” and simply to “put learners in the correct path”, as their main concern was to avoid another disruption of schooling as the learners were starting to write their Matric examinations – because the passing rates are so key to the position of the school in local “quasi-market of schooling” (Payet and Deneuvy, 2011).

Considering the testimonies of Jens, Serafina, Mahalte and her little sister still attending the school in 2021: this leniency towards the disobedience to the hairstyles policy among learners has continued since, suggesting that the institutional memory of the collective demonstration of power of disruption by a group of girls during the only protest that the school experienced in the post-apartheid era kept influencing the functioning of the school in the longer run. And this occurs, despite the formalisation of the banning of these hairstyles in the code of conduct.

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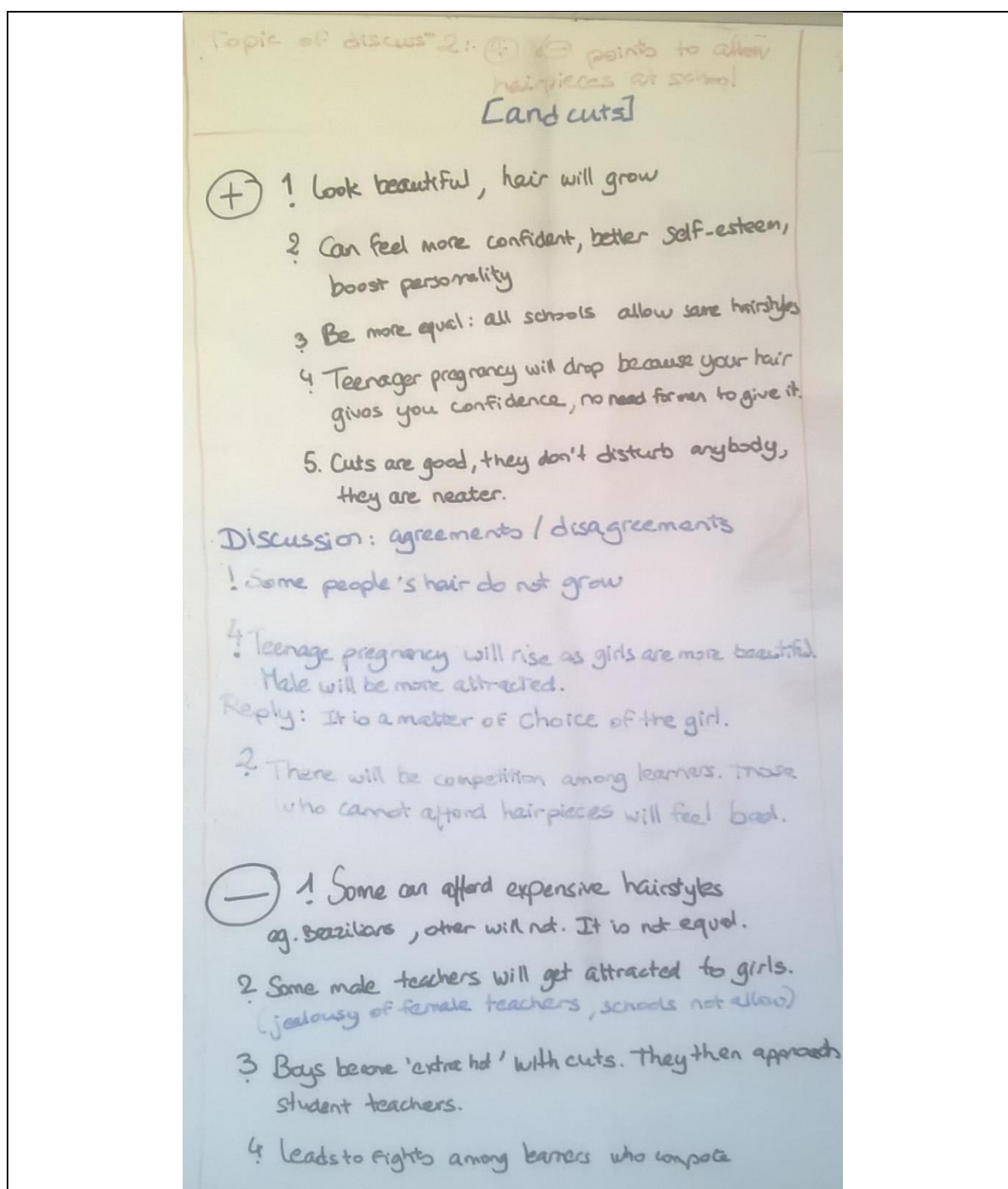
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Annexes

Sheets distributed to the classes to frame the class discussions

<p style="text-align: center;">Notice of meeting</p> <p>A meeting will be held for all Grade 9s to discuss the protest that took place at school on Friday the 4th of August 2017 as well as the content of the school's hair policy.</p> <p>Date: Monday 7 August 2017 Time: During English Period Place: Mr G's Classroom</p> <p style="text-align: center;">ALL GRADE 9s WELCOME</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Agenda</p> <p>The meeting of the Grade 9s will take place on Monday the 7th of August 2017 during the English period at Mr G's classroom.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Welcome2. Apologies from those who are absent.3. Briefing on Women's Day4. Briefing on school hair policy protest5. Briefing on the current hair policy at school6. Topic of Discussion 1: <i>Why was there a protest at school on the 4th of August 2017?</i>7. Topic of Discussion 2: <i>What are the positive and negative points associated with allowing new hairstyles at school?</i>8. Topic of Discussion 3: <i>What should be changed about the school's policy on hairstyles?</i>9. Voting10. Way forward

Remark: We did not have the topic of discussion 3 as we ran out of time during the first period.



SCHOOL UNIFORM – GIRLS	SCHOOL UNIFORM – BOYS
<p>SUMMER UNIFORM</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ School skirt with short/ long sleeve blue shirt. ❖ Hem of skirt not more than four fingers above the knee. ❖ Skirts may not be 'rolled -up' to shorten them (...) <p>WINTER UNIFORM</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ (...) No skinny pants may be worn. ❖ Shorts are allowed under skirts but may not be visible. (...) <p>HAIR</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Hair must be clean and neat. ❖ Hair reaching below the collar must be tied. ❖ No big hair buns on head. ❖ Ethnic hair allowed provided it is neat and tied up. ❖ No dreadlocks. No braiding allowed at school. ❖ Only black band allowed, no coloured clips. ❖ No colouring of hair. ❖ No clean shaven hair on the sides. (...) <p>NAILS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Must be clean and short. ❖ No nail varnish allowed. (...) ❖ No artificial nails allowed. (...) <p>MAKE-UP</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ No make - up is allowed when in school uniform or on 'civvies' days (...) ❖ No coloured or plain lip-gloss allowed <p>JEWELLERY</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ (...) No rings, chains bangles or sleepers is allowed. No gemstone earrings allowed. ❖ No nose-, tongue -, belly rings allowed. ❖ Jewellery will be confiscated if not according to school rules. ❖ Traditional ritual wear (arm/ necklace) may not be visible and must be accompanied by a written consent from parent/ guardian. 	<p>SUMMER UNIFORM</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ (...). No skinny pants may be worn. ❖ Only black belt with pants- No fancy buckles. ❖ (...) No 'happy' socks allowed. <p>WINTER UNIFORM</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ (...) No skinny pants may be worn. ❖ (...) No beanies or head covers may be worn inside classrooms or at the assembly point. <p>HAIR</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Hair must be neat and clean. ❖ Hair may not have a prominent 'step'. ❖ Hair may not touch the collar or ears. ❖ Hair may not hang in the eyes. ❖ Pinstripes not allowed. ❖ Moustaches and beards are not allowed. Learners must be shaven. ❖ No colouring of hair. ❖ No clean shaven hair on the sides. ❖ No use of gel allowed. ❖ No Mohawk 'punk' style, dreadlocks, plaits or beads allowed. ❖ No patterns may be cut into eye brows. (...) <p>JEWELLERY</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ (...) No rings, chains or bangles. ❖ No earrings or studs are permitted. ❖ No nose-, tongue- or belly rings allowed. ❖ Jewellery will be confiscated if not according to school rules. ❖ Traditional ritual wear (arm bands/ necklace) may not be visible and must be accompanied by a written consent from the parent/ guardian. <p>NAILS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Must be clean and short. ❖ No long pinkie nails.