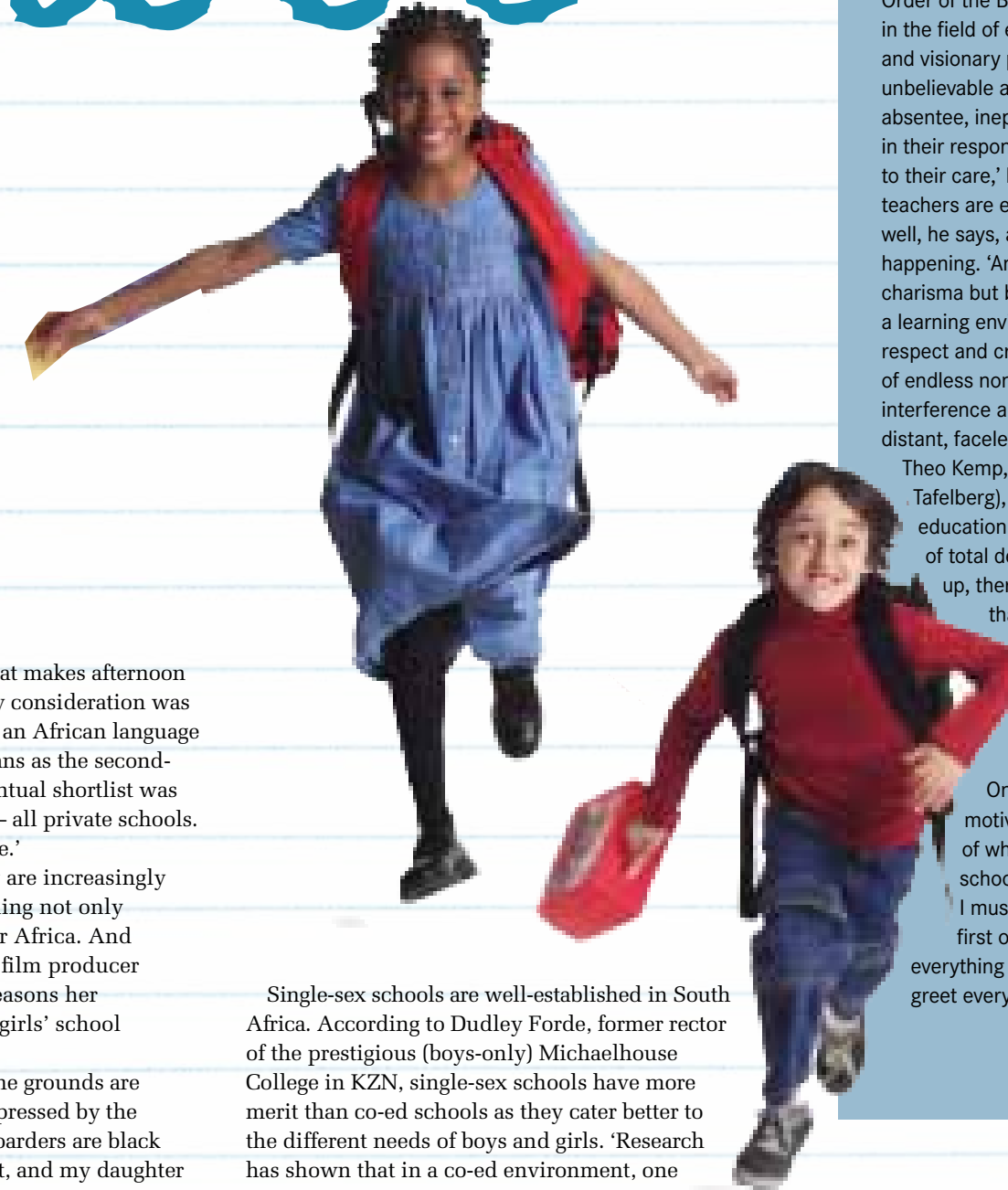




Which school is right?



If you're one of millions of parents trying to navigate your way through the education minefield, educating yourself is key. We speak to parents who've found the answer.

BY ISABELLA LO

If you have a child, you'll know how the conversation starts. 'What high school are you thinking of?' another parent will ask. If you haven't yet thought about it, a nagging worry might wash over you, even if you're still years away from having to make the decision.

Time was when the decision was easy: children went to a school close to where they lived. If a family was financially comfortable, that might have meant a private school. If not, the local government school was an acceptable alternative, and may even have turned out better results than the 'posh' one up the road.

Today, South Africa's education system is far more divided and difficult for parents to navigate. In one camp are the government schools, which receive bad press: disappointing results, lack of discipline and poor-quality, unmotivated teachers. Recently, Cosatu's spokesperson, Patrick Craven, went as far as to say that the reason Cabinet ministers wouldn't answer

a question about where their children went to school was that 'their kids are in private schools' as 'they don't have much faith in their public institutions'.

In the opposite camp are the private schools, most of which offer a top-drawer education, but at a price that excludes all except the affluent. In-between are former Model C schools, formerly whites-only schools that were integrated in 1992 and are partly state-, partly parent-funded. Some of these, like Parktown Girls High or Jeppe Boys High in Johannesburg, enjoy good reputations, but all of these now face enormous challenges due to the huge number of applications every year, as well as dictates by government affecting their autonomy.

For parents in the middle-class bracket, a number of considerations feed into their 'what school?' dilemma: a school's religious or cultural leaning, whether it is sport- or academia-focused, whether it's a traditional or 'alternative' school, single-sex or co-ed (boys and girls), boarding or day school, languages taught, methods of discipline, where it's located... it's nothing less than bewildering. For some, however, the map is clearer.

GLOBAL CITIZENS

Author and journalist Sandile Memela's decision to enroll his two teenage daughters at Catholic private school Brescia House in Bryanston was largely based on

his own experience at Holy Cross missionary school in Diepsloot, Soweto. 'We were taught not only meditative prayer but to appreciate values such as selfless service, sacrifice, integrity, communality and telling the truth, irrespective of the consequences.'

He is happy with his decision. 'Brescia is pretty expensive but worth the sacrifice, because they [his daughters] seem to have a relationship with God, and are poised to be global citizens. The purpose of education is primarily to improve the moral character of a person, as without that it serves no significant purpose,' he says.

A strong Christian ethos pervades many of the former Model C schools, too, a good example being Westville Girls High in Durban, where Nicola Jarvey, a project manager in KwaZulu-Natal, intends sending her daughter. But for her it's more important that all religions are embraced in a multicultural school environment. 'I want my daughter to have an education that is balanced and in touch with reality. I don't want her to be with children who have lost touch with reality, essentially because money is no object,' she says, referring to private schools.

A media personality who lives in KZN, who did not want to reveal her name because high-powered parents are often criticised for choosing private schools, says she needed to find a good boarding school for her son.

She travels a lot and has a career that makes afternoon supervision impossible. But the key consideration was language. 'I wanted a school where an African language didn't play second fiddle to Afrikaans as the second-language choice,' she says. Her eventual shortlist was Hilton, Kearsney or Michaelhouse – all private schools. 'In the end, my son made the choice.'

Boarding schools in this country are increasingly multicultural, due to children coming not only from South Africa but from all over Africa. And this, according to Jackie Malane, a film producer from Johannesburg, is one of the reasons her daughter boards at Roedeana, a top girls' school in Parktown, Johannesburg.

'The facilities are excellent and the grounds are beautiful, but I was particularly impressed by the fact that a large percentage of the boarders are black children from all over the continent, and my daughter immediately felt comfortable there. She has really blossomed since enrolling this year,' she says.

Jackie never considered a co-ed school because – like many parents of girls – she believes boys may become a distraction, especially during the high-school years. 'Other parents have told me that their 12-year-olds at co-ed schools have boyfriends. I prefer a school environment that doesn't present this potentially risky scenario.'

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THE PRINCIPAL PRINCIPLE

The principal of a school has a pivotal role to play, says Dudley Forde, former Michaelhouse rector, who last year won the Order of the Baobab for his outstanding leadership in the field of education. 'Hard-working, committed and visionary principals have presided over almost unbelievable achievement, while on the other hand absentee, inept and autocratic principals have failed in their responsibility to the children committed to their care,' he says. A good principal ensures teachers are enabled and encouraged to teach well, he says, and must notice when that is not happening. 'An effective principal leads not with charisma but by example. They focus on creating a learning environment that allows love, trust, respect and creativity to flourish – free of the chains of endless nonproductive paper work, officious interference and morale-sapping meddling from distant, faceless authorities.'

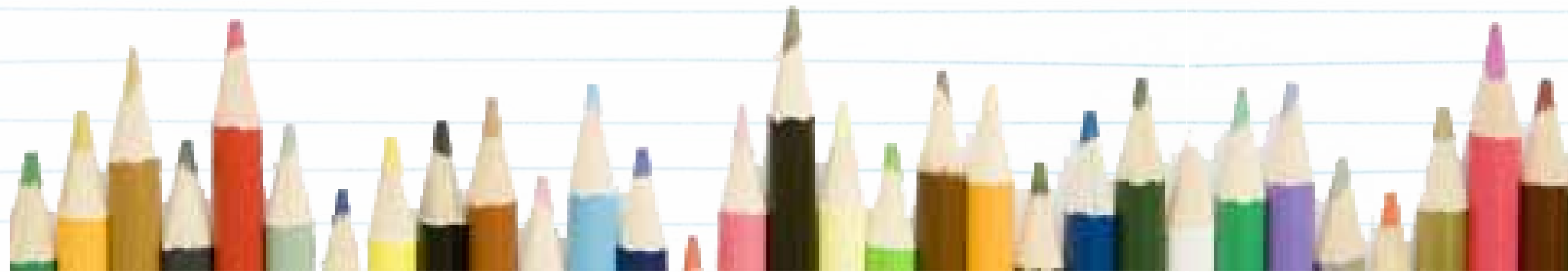
Theo Kemp, who wrote the book *Skoel* (R195, Tafelberg), an incisive inquiry into the state of education in South Africa, says he found stories of total despair, but 'just when I wanted to give up, there was an individual who showed me that change is possible'. Changes come when one person decides to make a difference, against all odds, he says. 'That individual can change the way a school system works, and even the surrounding community.' One such principal told Theo how he motivated teachers and learners, some of whom had to walk for miles to get to school: 'I am in charge here, therefore I must lead. Every morning I am the first one on the premises, ensuring that everything is still in place. Then I go around and greet every teacher and every learner.'

Single-sex schools are well-established in South Africa. According to Dudley Forde, former rector of the prestigious (boys-only) Michaelhouse College in KZN, single-sex schools have more merit than co-ed schools as they cater better to the different needs of boys and girls. 'Research has shown that in a co-ed environment, one or the other gender can be disadvantaged. Girls advance and mature more quickly than boys, for instance, especially in the earlier schooling years, and boys thrive on plenty of activity,' he says. He agrees with the views of Leonard Sax – an American doctor, psychologist and author of the book *Boys Adrift* (R143, Basic Books) – that boys especially do better at boys-only schools, in particular those who might be labelled ADHD or aggressive.

On the other hand, research has shown that children who attend single sex schools do no better than those at co-ed schools. Co-ed schools are also seen by many educators and parents as providing a more 'normal' environment that mimics the world outside of the classroom where children have to learn to interact with and socialise with the opposite sex.

Having become accustomed to pooling their different talents and co-operating with each other in the classroom, university and work relationships later will be easier to navigate for these children, they say.

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QUIZ YOURSELF

Educational psychologist Melanie Hartgill says you'll have a clearer idea of school choice if you ask yourself the following:

- **Who is your child? What are his/her interests and strengths?** 'Your child's nature should also have an input into the school they go to, within reason,' she says.
- **What are the morals and values you want the school to nurture and support?**
- **Are you looking for a school that demands excellence in the classroom?** 'Some schools are highly pressured academically and focus on achieving good results, sometimes to the point of excluding other areas that ensure the development of a well-rounded personality,' she warns.
- **What are your religious beliefs and values, and does the school uphold them?**
- **What are your thoughts in terms of cultural activities, or is this not important in your family?**
- **How big a role do you want sport to play in your child's life? How big a role does your child want it to play? Do you want your child to develop sporting prowess, and is this more important than academic achievement?** 'Remember, some kids excel at sport but only just keep their head above water academically. Is this your child?'
- **What are your morals, values and discipline style, and how do you want the school to handle these issues?**
- **Visit the schools you are interested in, with your child, and take a proper tour. Try to see your child in the school. Do the pupils look happy? How is your child responding to the environment?**

Educational psychologist Aileen Morrison says that in choosing, 'it depends purely on the individual child'. 'Some children thrive in a single sex environment, but others find it restrictive and isolating. It's about finding the best "fit" for your child,' she says

Janet de Kretser, a PR manager in Johannesburg who chose Parktown Boys High for her two children, says she made the decision based on advice from Tom Clarke, the school's former headmaster. He said boys should be in an environment where they can focus on their academic, cultural and sporting achievements without female distractions.

'I always thought that was sound advice. My boys thrived in this competitive yet nurturing environment,' she says.

Discipline, or perceived lack of it, comes up as another huge concern when choosing a school, and institutions plagued by reports of bullying or truancy can get a bad rap in the powerful parent word-of-mouth mill.

'My son was a tearaway rebel, and I found he wasn't adequately supervised at his boarding school in Krugersdorp (a former Model C),' says Allison MacDonald, a PR manager from Johannesburg.

'It may not have been the fault of the school, which could have just been a bad fit for him. But when I put him in Treverton College in KZN, where he is now carefully managed, he got back on course and his grades are up again.'

Similarly, 'new' as opposed to traditional, far-flung rural schools, or schools regarded by some as 'alternative', such as Waldorf – which focuses on educating through doing and making rather than theory – might be frowned upon by parents who prefer mainstream institutions. But there will always be

parents who praise their merits as much as those whose children go to the country's best private schools.

'I chose Waldorf for my daughter because I liked the kids I knew who went to those schools,' says Johannesburg filmmaker Sam Kelly.

'Six years on and I am still blown away by the Waldorf system. It teaches the kids how to think, gives them a thirst for knowledge, and allows them to blossom. I think that if every child had this kind of education, the world would be a different place.'

Kerry Dimmer, a business writer in Johannesburg whose daughter boards at Southern Cross Schools, an educational complex in Hoedspruit, Mpumalanga, is thrilled with her choice. Subjects like bush lore and sustainable living are included in the curriculum.

'My daughter has an adventure almost daily. As a result she has become a well-rounded, independent and grounded individual with enormous insight into the environment.

'This is how all schools should operate, in my opinion, by providing an alternative that has a strong focus on something useful outside of normal curricula,' she says.

Ultimately, it comes down to a family and child's needs and expectations. All schools have conflicting stories told about them, and every school has its strengths and weaknesses. This means that 'doing homework' is not only a child's responsibility but the parent's, too. **i**

