FACTORS INFLUENCING THE CHOICE OF SCHOOLS

School choice is a daunting task for caregivers who have to consider which school will optimally support their child's early social, emotional and cognitive development. *Alastair van Heerden* and colleagues surveyed a sample of households in rural and peri-urban KwaZulu-Natal to better understand the factors that parents in such communities consider when making this critical decision.

Researchers at the HSRC and New York University (NYU) conducted a short-term study of 1 961 children (7–10 year olds) and their families to better understand the factors parents consider when deciding on schools for their children. The study took into account the fact that for many living in low-resource settings, their preferred choice and the realistically practical choice could be very different.

Study methods

Study participants (children and their households) were systematically sampled from 24 communities in close proximity to the HSRC Sweetwaters office in the Msunduzi municipality in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN). This area is characterised by high rates of household poverty and a high burden of HIV, resulting in parental illness and death. Each community was selected on the presence of a primary school within walking distance from the homes that were interviewed.

Of the 1 961 households, 1 891 children were identified as attending school. The following reasons were provided for children who did not attend school: financial problems, chronic illness and disability, school safety and a child not wanting to enrol.

The distance between home and the attending school was calculated for each of the 1 891 households. Researchers found that most children (85.5%) attended a school within a short distance (i.e. 3 km) of their homes. A smaller percentage (13.7%) used schools situated 5 km or further from their homes. Peri-urban denotes areas of extreme poverty at the perimeter of developing world towns or cities. There was often more than one school within the 3 km walking distance of a child's home. This was particularly true in the peri-urban environment.
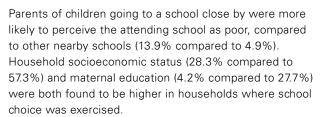
> **Caregivers who sent their children to schools in close proximity took into account costs, distance and not having another option.**

Choosing schools

When looking at the reasons caregivers in both rural and peri-urban environments gave for choosing schools that were either close or distant, it became clear that caregivers who sent their children to schools in close proximity took into account costs (34.7% compared to 12.7%), distance (69.4% compared to 7.8%) and not having another option (22.0% compared to 4.2%). Those who sent their children to distant schools mentioned the following reasons: social (10.3% compared to 16.6%); the school's ethos and inherent culture; and the performance of the school (23.4% compared to 73.6%).

> **Those who sent their children to distant schools mentioned the following reasons: social, inherent culture, and performance of the school.**

Parents of children going to a school close by were more likely to perceive the attending school as poor, compared to other nearby schools (13.9% compared to 4.9%). Household socioeconomic status (28.3% compared to 57.3%) and maternal education (4.2% compared to 27.7%) were both found to be higher in households where school choice was exercised.

Although boys and girls were equally likely to go to either close or far schools, slightly more 7-year-old children went to a school close by (24.2% compared to 18.2%) and slightly more 10-year-olds went to a distant school (24.7% compared to 29.0%).

Modelling these responses revealed that those caregivers who chose schools in close proximity were five times more likely to say they had no other choice, than parents sending their children to distant schools. Mothers with a tertiary education were also more than four times more likely to send their children to a distant school.

Social inequality deep seated

The implications of these findings is that as socioeconomic inequality in South Africa grows, so parents of low

socioeconomic status will find themselves more and more segregated from – and without access to – the better-resourced schools in the country. This is also confirmed by other studies.

> **As socioeconomic inequality in SA grows, so parents of low socioeconomic status will find themselves segregated from... better-resourced schools.**

Although school choice has the potential to reduce racial segregation in schools, the often substantial costs associated with learner mobility make this eventuality unlikely. Rather than the education system becoming a tool for overcoming inequalities in South Africa, current disparities are likely to become more entrenched.

This data suggests that in the current policy context in which school choice is permitted, more thought should be given to ways of making school choice a reality across the entire socioeconomic spectrum where choice is not an option for many families with a low household income.

The decision about which school to send one's child to is a complex, multifaceted, intergenerational decision coloured by the decision maker's own academic history. For many caregivers, the decision is a simple one – the closest school is on the whole sufficient. It is easy to access, safe and affordable. For others, socioeconomic conditions curtail the options available and limit the choice of school. Although parents may wish to send their child to a different school, they do not have the social capital or economic resources required to send their child to any but the closest schools.

Finally, a small but significant group of children attends schools chosen by their caregivers for reasons other than cost and convenience. These schools' academic performance, culture and social considerations all play a role in the caregivers' choice, and the families have the resources to act on these factors.

These findings suggest that although access to education is now broadly available, policy should begin to address the need for access to high quality education within walking distance of rural and peri-urban households. ■

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