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# School choice and intra-township migration: Black parents scrambling for quality education in South Africa

Vuyisile Msila

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## Abstract

School choice in South Africa brought much hope to parents who have always yearned for quality education. Apartheid laws prohibited black learners from attending the then exclusively white schools. However, post-apartheid education reforms in the late 1990s saw many empowered black parents 'exiting' the (historically black) township schools, opting for the better resourced, historically white, Indian and Coloured schools. This study shows that school choice does not only happen when black parents and learners move from historically black schools to historically white schools. Sometimes, they move within the township, searching for what they believe are quality schools. There are still many community members in the historically black areas who maintain that some township schools work hard despite the persisting challenges which include being under-resourced, demotivated staff and uncommitted, ineffective stakeholders.

This article also reports on the findings of a study conducted in eight township primary schools to investigate the choice strategies black parents utilise when they choose certain township schools over others.

## Introduction and problem postulation

Woolman and Fleisch (2006) contend that historical and political influences have resulted in unintended consequence of producing school choice in South Africa. Furthermore, they aver that school choice was not the state's adoption of a conscious and deliberate policy. Historically, schools before 1994 were divided according to racial lines hence the past education system was an effective tool in dividing the society (Kallaway, 1988). Schools entrenched inequality as learners were confined in segregated schools. Many poor and black parents as well as their children had no choice but to remain in historically black areas (townships), whilst white parents registered their children in private schools and better resourced public schools. It was also apartheid policy that Indian and Coloured learners had their own schools. With the advent of democracy, black parents and their children have tried to

address the issues of equality in education. This is akin to what happened in the United States of America (USA) where African-American learners have always found it necessary to deal with issues of both equality of opportunity and quality education in order to revitalize and probably save their communities (Morken and Formicola, 1999). These writers also explain how segregation excluded all African-Americans from good schools.

It was the introduction of framework legislation which included the National Education Policy Act (NEPA) and South African Schools Act (SASA) that led to the creation of South Africa's 'unintended' experiment in school choice (Woolman and Fleisch, 2006). Furthermore, these acts led to the enabling quasi-markets for the consumers. Unlike in the USA and other first world countries, school choice in South Africa neither includes public and private vouchers for parents nor does it include the idea of charter schools. However, parents have learnt to vote with their feet by sending their children to schools that they think will best serve their interests. It is through the exercise of choice that some black parents for example, will move their children from historically black schools to other schools outside their areas of residence.

Van Heemst (2004, p.165) states that "education is the key for poor children. Many different voices have proclaimed choice as a vehicle for empowering poor children". Furthermore, Van Heemst (2004) cites *The Condition of Education 2000* document which proclaims that by choosing the school that their children attend, some parents may perceive that they can influence the quality of education their children receive. The poor parents might prefer school choice because there are possibilities that through it they can address past segregation and waning quality in historically black schools. The idea of black parents exercising choice in South Africa is not a novel one though. Historically, it can be traced right into the 1970s when protests in (especially) urban schools grew as black schools were transformed into sites of struggle. A number of parents moved their children to remote, usually (rural) areas, most of which were part of the homeland system; the Transkei, Bophuthatswana, Venda and Ciskei (TBVC) states. These parents wanted their children to study in undisturbed environments of these TBVC states.

It was, however, after the demise of apartheid that black parents explored their choice options further by securing enrolment places for their children in suburban, former white schools. The historically white schools are sometimes referred to as ex-Model C schools. Ex-Model C schools are formerly white

schools that were funded partly by the government (80%) and partly by the parents (20%) (Dekker and Van Schalkwyk, 1996).

However, it should be noted black parents have not only ferried their children to the ex-Model C in search of better and quality education, they have also registered their children in former Coloured and Indian schools. There is another less explored but interesting aspect where parents and their children have looked at other better schools within the black townships hence the ‘intra-township migration’. Black families appear to prefer certain schools to others among the historically black schools (Msila, 2005). Although these families are dealing with a set of schools with similar histories and challenges, they tend to believe that some of these are more effective. This study wishes to investigate the question:

Why do some township parents prefer certain historically black schools to others within the township?

Sub-questions addressed include the following:

- Who are the township parents who exercise the intra-township choice option?
- Who benefits when school choice is exercised among township schools?

For the purposes of this article the word ‘black’ refers to *black Africans* and does not include Coloured or Indian South Africans.

## Brief theoretical framework: exit, loyalty and voice option

Msila (2005) contends that township black parents can exercise choice by selecting any of the three kinds of choices when it comes to school choice. These are the voice, loyalty and exit options. The voice option alludes to when parents decide to stay in their current schools whilst they try to change them from within. Loyalty refers to the option when parents do not have any recourse or alternatives and they end up letting their children remain in (township) schools even when they are not effective. The exit option refers to the option frequently exercised by a number of parents who have moved their children from schools in their domicile to find them schools usually situated in

the suburbs. Woolman and Fleisch (2006) aver that many South African learners do not have access to quasi-markets in schools. The absence of these is apartheid's creation that is deeply entrenched in inequalities in primary and secondary schooling (Woolman and Fleisch, 2006).

Based on A.O. Hirschman's theory, Msila (2005) argues that the customers (township parents in this case), shop around for better schools and when they are not happy with what they have in township schools, they take their business outside the township schools. Maile (2004) also contends that parents complain about the declining quality of education their children receive in rural or township schools. Maile also argues that learners from the township migrate to better schools to acquire skills that will make them earn more and be economically empowered in future.

## Significance of the study

It is a critical commonplace that numbers have continued to increase in ex-Model C schools and former Indian and Coloured schools as black learners leave township schools. As highlighted above, Msila (2005) writes about the prominence of the 'exit option' as parents opt for better schools outside their neighbourhoods. Research on school choice is fairly new in South Africa although focus has been on the exodus of black learners from township schools to other schools outside the boundaries of the townships. School choice exercised outside the township was potentially virtuous for integration purposes. Yet while a number of schools, especially ex-Model C schools, opened their doors, in some schools access for black learners was limited through admissions policies determined by governing bodies of the schools as well as increasing fees among other factors (Naidoo, 1996). However, it is also true that quality in a number of township schools has waned as a result of the constant exodus away from these historically black schools (Msila, 2005).

What this study investigated are the experiences in some of these historically black schools. The study sheds light as to what causes parents to engage in intra-township choice exercise. Township schools need to learn lessons from this, for these schools will hardly improve if they cannot understand what parents and communities perceive as good practices of performing schools. Various studies are also necessary to inform policy as to what the markets demand and expect from 'good schools'. Whilst school choice might be controversial, it might be a missing link between high performing and low performing schools.

## Literature review

Plank and Sykes (2003) state that school choice policies are sweeping the world. Furthermore, they point out that governments in various countries have decided that giving parents more choices among schools is an effective response to local educational problems. With the advent of democratic dispensation, in post-apartheid South Africa, there have been various educational options opened up for (especially), historically disadvantaged parents. As pointed out above, school choice has not spread without controversies; it is a new terrain, involving new ideas, new figures, new alignments and new educational solutions (Wolfe, 2003). Many middle class black parents, in search of better schools have used the opportunity of the scrapping of apartheid education as a way to exercise the exit option and register their children in distant, historically white schools.

Gorard, Taylor and Fitz (2003) concur with Van Heemst cited earlier, that among others, school choice extends privilege to all as it enables children from poor families to be able to join effective schools. However, there is a paradox to school choice in that for meaningful choices to be available to most parents, schools need to deny choice to few families (McGhan, 1998). McGhan explains this by stating that the desire to broaden access to schools enables schools to drop disruptive and uncooperative learners. Sometimes parents might also choose schools for wrong reasons (Goldhaber, 1997, p.144). Furthermore, Goldhaber states:

For school choice to lead to improvements, the competition between schools should be based on educational quality. However, past evidence provided by Charles Clotfelter and new evidence I will present below suggests that, independent of the quality of the school, the racial composition of a school may be an important factor in parental decisions.

However, Gorard *et al.* (2003) also contend that school choice has a potential of driving up educational standards and that effective schools become popular whilst ineffective schools wane.

Wolfe (2003) argues that some critics state that schools often fail to accomplish the objective of promoting equality, instead they tend to reinforce inequalities of capitalism. Yet choice parents can hardly be dissuaded because they maintain that they are choosing the best schools for their children thus ensuring a secure future for them. The deterioration of learning and teaching quality in township schools is the most cited reason for the exodus away from township schools (Msila, 2005).

Pampallis (2003) avers that the struggles waged by learners in historically black schools resulted in deterioration in the quality of black education as school boycotts, strikes and other forms of resistance took their toll on 'normal' schooling processes. Furthermore, Pampallis argues that these acts increased the quality gap between white and black schools. Currently, the historically black schools have various challenges that include the breakdown in the culture of learning and teaching. Within this waning culture of learning and teaching though, some schools have remained better than others. Arguably, the biggest challenge facing township schools currently is how quality can be brought back thus transforming them into effective sites of learning.

## The study

### Research methods and data collection

Convenience sampling was utilised for the purposes of this study. Convenience sampling is sometimes referred to as accidental or availability sampling and it involves choosing readily available people or objects for the study (Brink, 2000). Fraenkel and Wallen (2000) also point out that this kind of sampling comprises of a group of individuals who (conveniently) are available for a study. Eight intermediate schools were selected in the townships of Port Elizabeth. All these schools had Grade 7 as the highest grade and after Grade 7 learners go on to high schools. Grade 7 lists of learners who had applied for admission in various township high schools were asked for. The management of the eight schools had sent out forms to all Grade 7 parents to indicate where their children would be going to the following year. A reasonable number of parents responded by filling in the forms, indicating their schools of choice. The majority of these parents are poor, working class parents who had chosen township schools for their children. The researcher then selected and contacted ten parents in each of the eight schools. Whilst choice is frequently exercised by both learners and their parents, the study was more interested in investigating parental school choice decisions. In the various schools there were parents who did not respond as to where their children were going but these parents were not investigated; the study focused on choice strategies exercised by concerned parents. Of the eight schools under study, four are situated near informal settlement areas where unemployment is rife. The rest of the schools are situated inside the township away from the informal settlement.

The data collection procedure included structured and unstructured interviews with the participants. The principals had earlier, through the Schools' Governing Bodies (SGBs), asked for parents who would volunteer in the study. There was an overwhelming response to the call although only ten parents were selected in each of the eight schools. The interviews took place in the homes of these parents after an appointment was arranged with each of them. While the researcher also visited the schools of these parents and also briefly interviewed the eight principals (for triangulation purposes), the main focus was the attitudes of the parents. The participants' most distinguishable qualities were age, level of education as well as their employment details.

Age was spread as follows:

18 yrs to 30 yrs = 28 parents  
31 yrs to 50 yrs = 20 parents  
50 yrs to 87 yrs = 32 parents

The parents' level of education:

31 parents had less than Grade 8 education  
37 parents had some high school but less than Grade 12  
12 parents had Grade 12 and higher post-school diplomas and certificates

Of these 80 parents and guardians, 31 were males and 49 were female. 16 of these male participants were not employed and 22 women were also not employed.

## The findings

The notion of parents' choosing choice has assumed centre-stage and it cuts across families of different socio-economic status. All parents want better education for their children, albeit the idea of *better education* might be interpreted differently as one moves from one individual to the other. At a time when the public needs effective schools, school choice has a potential of enhancing that effectiveness in ailing township schools. It can be discerned in this study that school choice within the township empowers parents and that it is the last hope for education after other reforms have failed (Morken and Formicola, 1999). In fact, intra-township migration cannot be regarded a panacea but in the long run it can assist in entrenching the necessary

competition among township schools. With the migration happening from weak schools to good township schools, the onus will be on the weaker schools that are losing numbers to improve or close down. A majority of parents in the study were IsiXhosa first language speakers and all wanted schools that could teach their children to speak English well. Some of these parents also wanted schools that would teach their children good morals. There were also a number of them who explained quality education as that system that would enable their children to be able to acquire better paying jobs.

The poverty levels also make the parents conjure own definitions as what good schools should be. For the latter parents good schools literally attend to bread and butter issues.

As one parent, Nomsa puts it:

I chose the high school close by because it is a good school. My children will get soup and bread frequently. Moreover, the school fees are much less as compared to Mhlophe for example. Mnyama is cheap and the teachers are very compassionate. Moreover they do not call us more often for school meetings and such like.

Nomsa is supported by Lizi whose child is to enrol in the same school:

We are unemployed members of the community. Therefore, it is important that we get our children to good schools around the township. I think Mhlophe will be ideal for my child. They do not enforce school uniform and the principal is loved by the community. He organises a number of good things for us. Our children are always in good hands there because their English is not bad although it is a township school.

Lisa supports some of the sentiments above although her idea of quality education seems a bit different. She works two days a week at a cotton and garment firm. She said she would have loved to see her children go through city schools, the historically white schools, but she maintains that the money would be too much for her. The bus fare, the school fees, books and uniform would all be too much for her. She points out:

I would like to take my children to schools outside the township but where is the money? My child will go to Mhlophe or Bomvini. I do not think they are bad schools because at least there is still a bit of discipline shown by learners there. But everybody is sending their children to town. The city schools are better, don't you agree?

A number of the working class parents living in the informal settlements, where many are unemployed, would like to see their children in historically



white schools away from the townships. Their children would be able to speak better English and/or Afrikaans thus ‘preparing them for a future world of work’. However, as pointed out by some participants, the nearby schools are usually preferred for practical purposes suiting the parents’ pockets. Children can walk to schools; the schools also have teachers who “understand our culture” and who could accommodate their meagre budgets. Therefore, to many parents in this informal settlement the proximity of the school, less financial burden and reinforcement of family values are among the most important determinants of school choice.

There was also a rather small group of parents in the study that consisted of those parents who had graduated from high schools and some having achieved diplomas and post secondary certificates. The level of education, the exposure to some cultural capital and certain societal pressures appeared to influence this second group of parents. Some of them are not working and a few live in informal settlements too, yet they define quality in a certain elaborate way, slightly differently from parents whose education level is lower. A number of these parents also stated that despite the lack of resources, there were better schools in the township. A pattern of ‘good and effective’ schools appeared as parents in certain areas seemed to choose certain schools that ended up topping our list of ‘good township schools’. In the four historically black areas selected, the following seemed to be the top of the crop as good schools. (All these are not the real names of the schools):

In Kwazakhele – Lubhelu High School  
In New Brighton – Mthubi High School  
In Motherwell – Pinki High School  
In Zwide/KwaMagxaki/KwaDwesi – Mdaka High School

The parents who were choosing certain schools over others cited the following as reasons for their choices in this order:

- good matric (Grade 12) results
- good management
- discipline
- reputation and history
- teachers’ dedication

There were a number of parents who did not seem to mind about how near the school is to their homes. A number of them skipped schools that were in their

immediate neighbourhood to opt for schools that were at a distance because of all or some of the above characteristics. The matric results of the schools though appear to overshadow some of the other characteristics of good schools. While the parents who had some level of education appeared to have tangible and more pedagogic reasons than those who have not gone through formal education, there appeared similar concerns amongst all parents. Even parents who have not been to school much, appeared to know what they expect from effective schools. In the sample, quite a number of parents from one area were content to leave schools in their area and send their children to the relatively distant Mthubi High School in New Brighton, because Mthubi had a proud township history. Many of the important people in the community had studied there and this school is also one of the oldest schools. The parents who exercised choice within township schools showed that, despite their economic situation, some of them knew what they wanted for their children.

Welile lives in Kwazakhele, some 15 kilometres away from New Brighton but wants his child to study at Mthubi High School:

As you can see, there is a school not far from my house but I do not want it. The teachers are lazy and the matric results there are always dismal. Last year that school managed a less than thirty percent pass rate in matric. Mthubi is a bit far. On cold rainy days Sizwe might need to take a taxi, but that is a good school. Their matric results last year tell us something. Higher than sixty eight percent!

In Motherwell, Wanda also maintains that he would exercise his powers as a chooser in the township. Like Welile above, he seems to know what he is looking for. Wanda postulates:

I would have loved to take my children to city schools. But I am a breadwinner here and my wife is an invalid, I have three children in high school already. I cannot afford a former white school. But Pinki high school is a good school. One of my children is doing matric there this year. I am sure she will pass reasonably well. That school is very good. Just look at the fields, the teachers and, most importantly, the annual matric results.

Asked about the importance of Grade 12 results in choosing schools one parent, Lydia said;

Yah! All parents want to see their children pass Grade 12 well. The grade opens or closes gates of the future. If you do well in Grade 12 you can get a better job or maybe if you are lucky be admitted by a good university. I am sure all parents when they select schools for their children they look for schools that do well in Grade 12. I wanted to transport my child to Mthubi High School in New Brighton but there is a long waiting list there. However, Lubhelu High School near my house is not so bad here in Kwazakhele. I am sure Wendy would enjoy that school too.

The reasons of some parents show that they have clearer goals as to what they want schools to do for their children than others. The reasons though might not always be pedagogic because some of the reasons cited as to why one school is preferred over another can be confusing. Among the non-pedagogical reasons cited are: ‘the teachers are friendly’, ‘the school is big’, and ‘the caretaker looks well after the gardens of the school’. There are also a number of ‘pointers’ that influence parents when making choices for their children. Teachers and learners leaving school early, smoking of learners while in school uniform, arriving at school late, and clumsy teachers are some of the negative pointers that repel some parents from certain schools.

Some parents perceive what they call the waning culture of learning and teaching in certain schools. They see some township schools as lacking a good climate and effective work ethic among teachers. Nimrod who wants his child to go to ‘any good school in the township’ states:

Many of us studied at a time of the struggle. Sometimes our schools were affected by the upheavals. But now we want effective schools where there is normality and the learners learn and teachers teach. Schools where management is weak and teachers are misusing funds our children will never learn. We need committed teachers. Our children will certainly follow teachers who are setting an example.

Sylvia who wants to send her child to Mthubi where she also studied concurs. She says that some teachers and parents ‘destroy our schools, for they are not committed’. Sylvia says that there needs to be commitment among all stakeholders if schools are to be successful. She continued:

We need the involvement of everybody here; the councillors, teachers, parents, community and religious leaders. We cannot run forever to city schools. Will our society perish? Yes, if we want it to. Honestly, I would have liked to move my child to a city school. But my husband does not work, we will not be able to transport the child. But the township school is not bad. It might not be our first choice but I know it is a better school here.

## Analysis of the results

The study reflected that although parents in township schools usually stay in these historically black schools, few do so of their own free will. A number of the parents in the study pointed out that many quality schools are outside the township, but they stay in the township schools for economic reasons. A number of them cited the challenge of bus fares or taxi fares, which would be expensive for them to afford having to bus the learners every day. There was also concern that many historically white schools charged fees that were not affordable for some parents. However, the study also displayed that, within the township, schools are not equal in the consumers’ eyes.

Notably, it is the black parents who have moved from historically black schools to former white schools. The latter appears to be the same in the USA where frustration exists among middle class professional blacks (Corwin and Schneider, 2005). Corwin and Schneider (2005, p.180) point out:

It is becoming increasingly obvious to them (middle class and professional blacks) that integration is a one-way street. If they have to move into a white community their children have to assimilate with white children. White adults and their children are not about to integrate into black communities. Even in few multiracial communities. . . the schools generally are pretty much devoid of white students, because they tend to be shipped off to private schools.

The scenario is similar in South Africa. Long after the demise of apartheid the historically black schools remain 100 per cent black (Msila, 2005). Therefore, when poor parents opt for choice in township schools, there are no prospects of integration as these schools are still black. Many of these schools are also stricken by poverty and have minimum resources. In discussing the findings two broad themes will be highlighted:

- 'Good schools', relevance and choice
- Changing schools through choice: the role of parents

### 'Good schools' relevance and choice

The transformation in the South African education system has enhanced the hopes of many parents including the poor. Many, confined in a life of poverty and squalor, see education as an opportunity to free their families as they invest in their children's education. A majority of parents hunt for schools with high pass rates; they look at education and success in economic terms. Choice matters for poor parents because it gives them hope when they select their ideal schools. Parental choice in township schools is unique in that it is different from school choice exercised outside the township. Outside the township choice parents might choose ex-Model C schools because they yearn for racial integration. However, black schools have remained 100 per cent black long after the attainment of freedom. Racial integration in schools has been a one-way process, with learners from historically disadvantaged racial groups seeking admissions to former white schools or schools previously less oppressed (Naidoo, 1996).

Van Heemst (2004) argues that there are two arguments when it comes to the

poor making wise choices. On the one hand some critics state that poor parents lack the essential resources such as time, energy, knowledge and education to make a wise choice of schools. On the other hand though some research points out that poor parents select their schools based on significant academic criteria (Van Heemst, 2004). Yet judging by the study's results, one can assume that a majority of parents know or can perceive when a culture of teaching and learning (COLT) has waned in certain schools. The latter distinguishes effective schools from ineffective schools. There are a number of these ineffective schools that have been beset by managerial problems. Mathibe (2007) contends that one reason that has always been advanced for failing schools is that principals are not appropriately skilled and trained in school management and leadership. Thurlow (2003) points out that the view that the core purpose of education management is to facilitate effective learning through effective teaching is now emerging in South Africa. Furthermore, Thurlow posits that the process of management is concerned with the transformation of schools so that effective learning can take place. In many instances, the school leaders and managers operate in climates that are far from being conducive for learning. McLennan and Thurlow (2003) state that the recent changes to the system of school governance have resulted in the majority of principals being under-prepared for their new roles. These writers also add that the collapse of COLT in many schools has eroded the confidence in education managers. Yet, the government in post-apartheid South Africa wanted a representative school governance where principals were accountable to the community, hence the SASA of 1996 pressed for the inclusion of parents and community in school governance.

Kruger (2003) points out that the COLT refers to the attitude of all the role players towards teaching and learning and the presence of quality teaching and learning at a school. Furthermore, Kruger states that the following are common features of a poor COLT; weak/poor attendance, educators do not have desire to teach, tensions among the various elements of the school community, vandalism, drug abuse, high drop out rate, poor school results, weak leadership, management and administration, demotivation and low morale, disrupted authority and poor state of buildings, facilities and resources. Lethoko, Heystek and Maree (2001) highlighted a number of factors that impact negatively on the COLT in historically black African schools. Among these is a lack of professionalism between teachers and principals as well as poor management of the school by the principal. Many parents can see some of these shortcomings in ineffective schools and choose the exit option as they look for better performing schools with a better COLT.

Parents in the study also highlighted some of the above problems that exist in the various schools. Some cited that they are compelled to move their children around township schools because there is no hope in certain schools where they find teachers 'despondent and uncaring'. Others cite the ineffectiveness of management in the schools. The politics of choice though are complex, as some parents are compelled by their SES to remain in the township even when they do not want to and these are the 'reluctant choosers'. The reluctant choosers might choose what they perceive as best among the worst. However, parents who strive to involve themselves in their children's education exercise choice as they search for good schools. Their role is immense in this regard.

## Changing schools through choice: the role of parents

As pointed out in an earlier discussion, choice proponents contend that good schools are usually strengthened and weak ones run the risk of being closed down. Alluding to this Chubb and Moe (1990) posit that schools that fail to satisfy many will go out of business. Furthermore, they state that of the schools that survive, those that do a better job of satisfying the consumers will be more likely to prosper. A number of schools had been closed already in Port Elizabeth for a number of reasons, including dwindling numbers of learners. There is hope for township schools though, that they might change for the better when competition rises (Msila, 2005). Even when parents choose schools for unpedagogic, 'wrong reasons', conscientious educators of schools losing through choice will arguably try to improve. Intra-township choice parents, while they are exiting certain township schools, assist in the betterment of neighbourhood schools.

A majority of parents 'know' what they expect from their children's schools. Whilst many poor and working class parents might not know what really goes on in their children's classrooms, it is outside the classroom that many will perceive what teachers do. Schools are not expected to achieve only the academics. The National Curriculum Statement (NCS) is a curriculum based on the South African Constitution and this implies the need for schools to heed their political function. Wood (1998) points out that only after people understand what it means to be citizen, to participate democratically, can they begin to sort out the shape and scope of the curriculum. "Public schools must assist in the unending work preparing citizens for self-governance in an evolving social environment, Through public schools, learners can be taught the values and skills necessary to administer, protect and perpetuate a free

democratic society” (Giroux, 1995, p.6). Sometimes, besides wanting their children to pass grades, parents would want to ensure that their children have a role in upholding societal values.

Chubb and Moe (1990) contend that the parents’ and learners’ role in public schools is overstated; they are only a part of a larger constituency that includes politicians, administrators and other groups at all levels of government. Chubb and Moe also state that even in perfect democracies public schools are not meant to be for parents to control and are not supposed to provide them with the kind of education they might want. Furthermore, they also point out that parents have no right to win and sometimes might have to take what the society gives them. However, school choice parents will try to vote with their feet with the hope of getting better education for their children. As highlighted above, sometimes they will lose and not get their way hence conflict might arise. Poor parents do sometimes choose schools that they do not necessarily like because they have limited options. Many poor parents and their children are condemned to their local public schools. They have no options; they have no chance to ‘opt out’. Their hopes and dreams are diminished by sending their children to schools at a severe competitive disadvantage due to a lack of funding. Their children might not live better lives than they did.

Lacking feasible exit option, whether through residential mobility or escape into private sector, many parents and learners will ‘choose’ a public school despite dissatisfaction with its goals, methods, personnel and performance (Chubb and Moe, 1990). A majority of township parents in the study would have liked to go to other schools outside the township had it not been for financial constraints. Many suburban schools are kilometres away from the historically black areas. “Transportation costs may eliminate many options. The unequal distribution of income in society may bias certain markets in favour of the rich against the poor” (Chubb and Moe, 1990, p.34). The findings also demonstrated many poor parents would like their children to avoid the cycle of poverty through the exercising of choice. Van Heemst (2004) states that choice should open the finest schools to all children and ensure that poor children will no longer be condemned to failing schools in their districts. However, in South Africa, some poor parents find themselves having to choose ‘better schools’ out of a pool of failing schools in the township. If justice is to be upheld and equality maintained, township schools will need much revamp to improve the quality.

## Conclusion

This article has shown that within the townships, some parents do have glimpses of hope that certain schools have the capacity to empower their children. They have come to realise that certain township schools are more effective than others. The study though, also demonstrates that it is usually poor parents who are compelled by their socio-economic status to remain within the township. Yet, Van Heemst (2004) avers that school choice is the single most effective weapon at the disposal of today's policy makers to liberate the poor. It is a majority of poor black parents who end up choosing to remain in township schools and this need not be punitive because they do not have the financial means to go to other 'better schools'. Education should offer them hope, hence their empowerment is necessary so that they can collaborate with teachers as they steer these schools to effectiveness and success. Arguably, it is also true that choice if not properly managed, can lead to injustice and segregation. The poor would always remain in township schools even when they do not want to. Scott (2005) avers that without safeguards, the expansion of school choice coincides with the segregation of learners and schools by race, social class, gender, ability and language.

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Vuyisile Msila  
Faculty of Education  
Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University

Faculty of Education  
University of Johannesburg

[vmsila@uj.ac.za](mailto:vmsila@uj.ac.za)