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# Factors affecting parents' choice of schools for Grade 1 learners

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**Background:** Parents are challenged to choose schools for their Grade 1 learners. They believe that the Department of Education's zoning and admission policy is too restrictive. Schools also do not provide adequate information to allow parents to make their choice.

**Aim:** This article aimed to identify factors that influence parents' choice of schools for their Grade 1 learners.

**Setting:** This study was conducted in Gauteng province. The identified environment and location provided rich data solicited from the participants on how they chose the schools.

**Methods:** This was a qualitative case study using individual and focus group interviews, with 10 parents (5 mothers and 5 fathers) of children enrolled in an ex-model C school. The parents' choice of school was examined through the seminal work of Hirschman's 'Exit, Voice and Loyalty' theoretical framework, which applied the three different elements to understand and identify the phenomenon of school choice in South Africa.

**Results:** The data gathered indicated that parents made choices considering the following factors: proximity; cost; curriculum; technology and relationships.

**Conclusion:** Since parents disagreed with the department's policy on admission, the Minister of the Gauteng Department of Education stated that the new school feeder zone regulation would ensure fair access to schools for all learners. This means that learners will not be discriminated against where they live. During the admission application process, the amended regulations are intended to assist learners to access schools in compliance with certain criteria. Parents are encouraged to select a minimum of three schools to enrol their children.

**Keywords:** Grade 1; school choice; curriculum; language; safety.

## Introduction

One of the seminal changes that occurred with the advent of a democratic government was the change in the South African education system. A primary consideration for the educational changes was to make schooling more accessible to all South African children. Parental decisions concerning the choice of a primary school for their Grade 1 learners in the public school system in South Africa had become much more complex today than 25 years ago. According to the *National Education Policy Act*, 1996 (Act No 27 of 1996), the school is obliged to admit learners within its feeder zone (Gauteng Education Department [GDE] 2019). Spaull (2013), stated that South Africa has the worst education of all middle-income countries, thus causing concern amongst parents. Parents are fully aware of this phenomenon and therefore enquire and seek out a school that provides quality education (Msila 2009; Ntekane 2018). It seemed that some parents became more involved in the choice of a public school and would like to exercise this choice in an attempt to find a school that offers quality education (Msila 2009). This study aimed to investigate factors that influence parents' choice of schools for their Grade 1 children. Many parents are experiencing challenges in deciding about which school their children will attend.

## Objective

The objective of this study was to identify factors that influence parents' choice of schools for their Grade 1 child. It further envisages making recommendations to improve and support parents in making this important choice.

# Literature review

The literature review focusses on factors influencing parents' choice of schools for their Grade 1 learners. The review also pays particular attention to various factors that parents take into consideration when choosing a school.

## Parents' choice of school

The second most important decision a parent will make, apart from deciding to have children, is deciding on which school to enrol them. Making the right decision is vital as this could put them on a path towards lifelong learning, a prestigious tertiary education and a successful career (Gomendio 2017). There has been a consistent interest in the phenomenon of school choice by academics, economists and policymakers. According to Levin and Milgrom (2004):

> In the standard view, rational choice is defined to mean the process of determining what options are available and then choosing the most preferred one according to some consistent criterion. (p. 1)

Dass and Rinquest (2017) and Plank and Sykes (2003), stated that school choice is where parents have an increasing say regarding which school their children will attend, particularly in the public sector. Although the South African governments, through different policies, make it possible for parents to make school choices, ultimately the parents decide, which school their child should attend. This decision is made taking into account various factors. Hirschman's (1970) theoretical framework gave parents the responsibility and accountability to make the most appropriate choices for their children by applying the principles of 'Exit, Voice, or Loyalty' options. Most South African parents are beginning to exercise these rights and responsibilities after the promulgation of the amended school admission policy by Minister Lesufi (Moodley 2019).

Parent's choice manifests itself in the public schooling system through a process of supply and demand. As education is not traditionally seen as a trading commodity, it is regarded as a quasi-market system. What needs to be acknowledged is that the legislative framework, about South Africa, created a quasi-market system in the education sector. According to Canals et al. (2018), the discussion regarding school choice has been on centralising the concept, which sees choice as codes for the marketing of education. School policies and legislation nationally and internationally focus on regulating school choice; this is not different within the South African context (Moodley 2019). According to Hoadley (1999), school policies in Britain and the United States were put in place to promote excellent performance in the education system, thus allowing parents to make their school choice.

The core of the argument is that an education system organised around free choice will enhance competitions amongst schools and in turn promote educational performance. If school choice is related to the market, then one has to acknowledge that it has an impact on the selection process and the options that parents have. Within the South African context, the choice of the best schools in the country is favoured by a select few who can afford the exorbitant school fees. However, most parents, according to Dass and Rinquest (2017) have limited school choices for their learners because of financial difficulties, therefore opting for no-fee schools.

## Factors influencing parents' choice of schools

The complexity of choice is further affirmed by the work carried out by Ball (2006) on school choice who argued:

> [P]arental choice of school is not susceptible to one definitive analysis. Different kinds of analyses highlight different aspects and patterns of choice. There are recurring themes and patterns, like the multifaceted relationships between social class and choice. (p. 89)

He further argues that parents are required to regard themselves as consumers of education, in other words, they can shop around for schools that best suit their needs. Parents are encouraged to see themselves as consumers of education and 'good parenting' is defined, at least in part, concerning the 'responsibilities' of choice'. In 2003, John Pampallis contended that school choice was part of addressing the injustices brought about by apartheid (Pampallis 2003:143). He further elaborated that in the light of South Africa's recent history, school choice is interwoven with overcoming racism and the aftermath of apartheid. Even though school choice is linked to addressing the injustices of the past apartheid system, there are also several factors concerning the practice in South Africa that resonate with the international arena. These causative factors as identified by Pampallis (2003:143) are 'parental control and community participation, school fees, marketization and competition between schools, class privilege, resource distribution, decentralization, liberty versus equality and school admission policies'.

In South Africa, according to Woolman and Fleisch (2006), the legislative framework that is *National Education Policy Act* (NEPA) No. 27 of 1996 and *South African Schools Act* (SASA) No. 84 of 1996 created school choice thus creating a quasi-market system in the public school system. According to Woolman and Fleisch (2006), the elements required for a quasi-market in schools exist are multiple schools of variable quality, information dissemination that can ensure informed decision-making, various schools and information on each so that parents can prioritise their preferences and a variation in price that meets the demands. This quasi-market system is skewed. In urban areas, there are enough products (schools) and buyers (parents) to choose from. However, in rural areas, many parents cannot exercise school choices as the high costs exclude them from exercising these options. It is also within this system that schools with exorbitant prices select who can access their school and thus determine whom they choose.

Although the given perspective seems quite simple and straightforward, Woolman and Fleisch argue how the interplay of various events in the South African legislation framework creates school choice, which enables parents to

choose to exercise 'voice, loyalty or exit'. Furthermore, school choice is a complex phenomenon driven by a varied set of factors, enabled by public policy and dependent on supply and demand, which create conditions for quasi-markets in schools (Woolman & Fleisch 2006).

One has to acknowledge the perceptions and experiences of parents that give rise to parental choice. According to Denessen et al. (2001), parents' school choice is influenced by the perceptions of parents and evidence that the culture of teaching and learning has steadily declined in some schools. This decline of learning and teaching manifests itself in dilapidated buildings, bad school discipline by educators, learners and delays in stationery and learning materials acquisition. As most parents have experienced and observed this phenomenon during their schooling and education, they are very eager to ensure that their children receive a quality education in comparison to theirs. Most parents are exercising their rights and responsibilities by making their voices heard and exiting schools where they are unhappy (Hirschman 1970).

According to the findings of Evans and Cleghorn (2014), school choice was influenced by the reputation and medium of instruction. In their study, a significant percentage of parents cite the reputation of the school as a key choice factor. Reputation received a score of 95.3% as an influential factor when it comes to school choice coupled with firm discipline. The parents alluded to the fact that the school's high standard also contributes to the school's positive reputation. This factor is also evident in the international scenario that even when parents do not participate in the voucher or charter system, they still ranked educational quality at or near the top according to Hamilton and Guin (2005:42). Although the curriculum is relatively standardised in South African schools, schools may add to what they offer. Parents recognise this in their choice of schools and focus on appreciation of their children's strengths and weaknesses and effective teaching approaches (Hegarty 1993:124).

Maile (2004:105) raised another interesting factor that is particularly noteworthy in the 21st century and that is the attraction of schools that are technologically connected. He focusses on the parents' tendency of preferring schools with new information technologies and innovative programmes. This factor is strongly linked to future employment opportunities, as schools that offer innovative programmes tend to be in private–public partnerships with enterprise development and are, therefore, competitive and add value to a future work pool, according to the DBE (2014).

According to Msila (2009), parents prefer schools with a sound reputation, good management and firm discipline, combined with dedicated teachers. Parents also proffered that despite the lack of resources, township schools are sometimes more effective (Msila 2009). In the South African context, it is important to note that these factors did not necessarily refer to a choice movement from township schools to suburbia schools. Astor et al. (2005) identified the following influential factors that were proposed by parents, namely excellent time management especially when it comes to the successful execution of tasks, successful monitoring of progress, harmonious relationships with parents, safe learning environments, academic focus and clarity of mission statement combined with high expectations.

Another factor that influences parents' choice of schools is cost and proximity. Msila (2009) observed that in his study participants reported that proximity to the home was a factor because it was financially favourable. According to Msila (2009), this group of parents although still choosing township schools, could choose the best school close to the home. This choice was expressed amongst others as many of the important people in the community had studied there and this school is one of the oldest schools. It is clear from the statement that the 'loyalty' option has been exercised by the parents according to the theoretical framework. The parents who exercised choice within township schools showed that, despite their economic situation, some of them knew what they wanted for their children (Durisic & Buijevac 2017). In their study, Evans and Cleghorn (2014) stated that school fees influence parents' choice of schools. According to Woolman and Fleisch (2006), several market-related factors also influence school choice. In their study, they recognised that parents seek out schools with reasonable and affordable school fees. This is evident that choices that parents make, they contend, subscribe to the markets.

According to Zuilkowski et al. (2017), it was found that high-income parents exercise school choice for their children. These parents prefer to purchase homes near the school. Woolman and Fleisch (2006) contended that the *National Education Policy Act* no. 27 of 1996, the SASA and the *Employment of Educators Act* provide the conditions that incentivise parents to exercise their options of school choice because parents exercise authority in the governance of the school through the School Governing Body (SGB). Schools can decide to charge specific amounts as school fees. These amounts are determined by the SGB. It is in the interests of the schools to then allow as many full fee-paying learners notwithstanding their residential area. This influences the parental school choice as parents can more freely 'shop' around for the school of their choice notwithstanding their residential area (Dass & Rinquest 2017).

Parents in a study by Evans and Cleghorn (2014) also cited proximity to home and workplace as important factors influencing school choice. In responses 46.5% participants stated that the school must preferably be close to where they live. Another 60.3% stated that it is advantageous if the school is close to where they work, which emphasises that location is a crucial factor when choosing a school (Evans & Cleghorn 2014). The fact that parents also based their choice on the medium of instruction, and particularly English, is an interesting factor. In Evans and Cleghorn's (2014), study this was evident when parents chose a school with an Afrikaans history yet there were four English medium primary schools in close vicinity. The school has adopted English as the medium of instruction.

The language factor is influential in parental choice, as it illustrates parents' perception that English provides their children access to better resources and ultimately the world of work, where English is the dominant language (Evans & Cleghorn 2014; Maile 2004; Msila 2009). The choice of schools based on language and especially English in the current South African society has strong political and improving social standing connotations (Lombard 2007; Maile 2004; Msila 2009). English [is] commonly viewed as the gateway to modernity, according to Heugh as cited in Evans & Cleghorn (2014). However, one should not hold an absolute view of English versus indigenous language use as English being the superior. According to Heugh (2002:15), 'an attachment to and high value accorded to English does not necessarily imply that an attachment to indigenous languages is proportionately reduced'.

Another two factors that are of interest to this study are that many parents make their choice not so much on the information disseminated by the schools, but really through friends and word of mouth. Most parents asserted that they based their judgements about the school quality mainly on the opinions of individuals who were part of their social networks (Lipsky, Friedman & Harkema 2017). In the study, it was also noticed that the kind of information parents shared was not generally about the school curriculum and the instructional quality, but it was more about the status of the parents who sent their children to the school. This observation is supported by the work of Msila (2009) who found that parents based their choice of school on the historical reputation of the school and if they could identify former community and national leaders who had attended the school, it was an incentive. Many of the renowned people in the community studied at that particular school which also encouraged parents to support the tradition of enrolling their children in the older schools, thus exercising their 'loyalty' option according to Hirschman's theory.

## Theoretical framework

A theoretical framework is defined as a system of concepts, assumptions, theories, beliefs and expectations that shape the research (Collins & Stockton 2018). Based on the seminal work of Hirschman's (1970) theory of 'Exit, Loyalty and Voice', parents can exercise choice by selecting any of the three kinds of choices when it comes to school choice. The *voice* option of the theory mentions the choice that parents have when they decide to stay in their current schools whilst they change them from within. Regarding the *loyalty* option, this refers to parents who do not have any alternative but to let their children remain in the school even when they are not effective. The exit option refers to parents' exercising their choice to move their children from their schools and residential area to find the schools where the quality of education is according to their expectations (Parret & Budge 2016).

Based on A.O. Hirschman's theory, parents usually shop around for better schools when they are not happy with what they have in their locality; they, therefore, take their
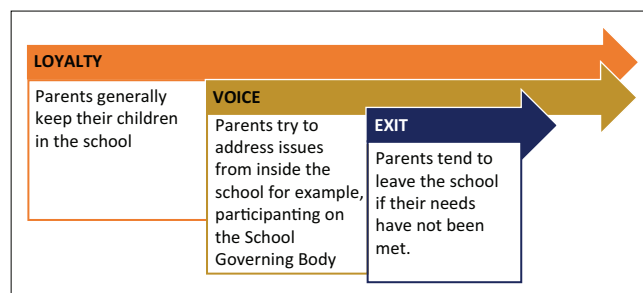


**FIGURE 1:** Parental school choices and positions taken.

business outside of their home environment. Neuman (2018) also contended that parents complain about the declining quality of education their children receive and therefore need to find schools that are providing quality education. Parret and Budge (2016) argued that learners from poor-performing schools migrate to better schools to acquire skills that will make them earn more and be economically empowered in the future. Parents, therefore, make choices regarding a school and have the ability to manage and deal with the consequences of such choices (Moore 2016).

## Methodology

This study applied a qualitative research approach located within the interpretivist paradigm to elicit factors that influence parents' choice of school for their Grade 1 learner (Yin 2018). According to Denzin and Lincoln (2011), this method provides the researcher with an opportunity to explore parents' reasons and motives for doing what they do and making meaning from them.

Data were collected through in-depth individual and focus group interviews. A purposive sampling method was used to select 10 parents (P), 5 mothers and 5 fathers from the same family who had children in an ex-model C public primary school in one district in the Gauteng province. A case study was chosen because the author aimed to elicit parents' explanation of their choice of schools for their children. Maree (2017) stated that a case study is based on a single individual or group, which may be descriptive or explanatory. Eight participants (four mothers and four fathers) participated in the focus group interview. One mother and one father of two learners were unable to participate in the focus group interview because of their work schedules. These parents were interviewed individually according to their availability in their homes.

The author used a semi-structured open-ended interview questionnaire to elicit information on parents' choice of schools for their children. The questions produced biographical data and questions on exit, voice and loyalty as described in the theoretical framework. Participants also responded to the factors that influenced their choice of schools for their Grade 1 learners.

Data analysis was inductive and emerged largely from individual and focus group interviews that were captured using the audio recording (Creswell 2014). The data were

analysed using the thematic approach (Creswell 2014; Guest, MacQueen & Namey 2012). The researcher compared multiple data sources in search of common themes (Creswell 2014). To ensure that the data were correct and without misinterpretation, post-transcription member checking took place (Maree 2017).

# Discussion and findings

From the data analysis, the following two major themes emerged that were used to answer the research questions:

- interpretation of education policy and the effect on the school
- factors that influence parents' choice of schools.

Verbatim quotes are used as evidence in the results. This section presents findings that emanated from the participants' responses.

## Theme 1: Interpretation of education policy and the effect on school choice based on proximity to home

There appears to be an interconnectedness between the parental interpretation of the education access policy about school proximity to home and how parents exercised school choices for their Grade 1 learner. The responses by participants indicated that they did not always favour the closest school to their residence, but were guided by a public education Policy on Regulations Relating to the Admission of Learners in Public Schools (GDE 2019) to consider this factor during school choice. Parents 1 and 2 clearly articulated their dismay by stating:

> 'Given this new basic education system it does not give you much choice, and because schools are divided according to zones you live in and so because this school was in my zone other schools refused to take my child. So I did not have much of a choice, I was almost forced to put her in that school.'

This was further articulated by Parent 1 who said:

> 'I lived in an area that wasn't, so ideal in terms of schools … Remember the Department of Education will do the zoning story and because of that zoning, my zone A had a public school of a poor quality, so we had to move further out.'

Evidence from the participants indicates that parents do not have much option when it comes to the choice of schools for their Grade 1 learner. This is in agreement with Hirschman's theoretical framework *loyalty* option because of their disadvantage parents are forced to be loyal to the school to let their children remain in the school even though the education is not up to their standard (Ntekane 2018).

The Department of Education's policy on zoning and admission did not favour Parent 9 who said:

> 'My daughter was actually put on the B list, yes, and they called me just a couple of days before schools opened. I applied at a lot of schools, but all of them declined her because she did not stay in the area.'

Parent 9 went on further to explain why she excised her choice to move her child out of the school by stating:

> 'All the other schools that I wanted my child to go to are very far away. My child would wake up early in the morning and it was too much effort for her and myself because of the distance, so that's why I decided to take her out and bring her closer to home.'

The observation by Parents 1, 3 and 9 indicated how parents exercised their choice by using their ability to exit a school. They were not satisfied with the school and therefore, found strategies to remove their children from the school. Parent 1 also later indicated that she was no longer satisfied with the school and could now move her child, as the GDE compulsory online process no longer restricted her. Parent 9 could move her daughter closer to home after 2 years of attending a school quite far from home. From this finding, it is evident that parents' exercised their authority to 'exit', which is in agreement with the 'exit option' in Hirschman's theoretical framework. Msila (2009), stated that sometimes parents move their children within the townships searching for what they believe are quality schools.

The GDE introduced the compulsory online application for learners in Grades 1 and 8 (GDE 2018). Parents are required to indicate that their choices are according to the following criteria: home, work, sibling and choice of school. Several participants reflected on the negative influence the education policy had on their school choice. According to Msila (2009), parents exercised school choice through 'loyalty' and 'exit' as articulated in the theoretical framework of Hirschman. This choice option is clearly illustrated in the conversation with Parent 1 who stated:

> 'I have no option but to keep my child in this school because all the other schools are too far away from my home. I also do not have money for transport to the other schools.'

According to Parent 2, he said, 'I could not keep my child in a school where she is not provided with quality education.'

## Theme 2: Factors that influence parents' choice of schools

### Learner–teacher relationships and the impact on the culture of teaching and learning

Participants also reflected on the relationship between parent–teachers and teacher–learners about the quality of teaching and learning. Parents acknowledged that it was difficult to receive access to this information. They agreed that this relationship structure was a strong indicator of quality teaching and learning. Claessens et al. (2016) agreed that the teacher–student relationship makes a tremendous impact on students' learning. Moment-to-moment interactions between teacher and student are the building blocks for their relationship. Regarding learner–teacher relationships, parents articulated their voices accordingly. Parent 1 stated:

> 'You know my seven-year-old daughter's teacher is an excellent teacher; she is an old teacher but you can see she is passionate about teaching. [*My daughter*]. She is excited about learning.'

Parent 2 strongly said that parents need to:

'[C]heck for the relationship between the child and teacher and parent and teacher – how that relationship is – those are some of the things I also look into what kind of feedback. When you go for the reports, when you have your one-on-one with the teacher, determine what kind of feedback the teacher gives you. Decide if it is a positive and or negative one and if it is negative monitor how she handles that feedback.'

Parent 8 contributed to the discussion of the teacher–learner and parent–teacher relationship by articulating:

'I mean your child is placed randomly in a class and you seldom meet the teacher, but the relationship between the parents and the teacher in the Foundation Phase is very important. The child is with the teacher for the whole day.'

Parent 8 was satisfied and therefore placed his second child at the school that could be interpreted as exercising his loyalty towards the school, which is in agreement with the 'loyalty' option of Hirschman. When parents are not satisfied, they will exercise their exit agency (Msila 2009). It was important to note the emphasis that parents put on a personal relationship with the teachers and between the teachers and their children. This was regarded as a key indicator for the quality of teaching and learning and a key factor influencing parent school choice for their Grade 1 learners.

Parents 1 and 2 agreed with Week (2012) that a process of relationship building is required for a healthy and conducive culture of teaching and learning. Initially, educators and learners are strangers and a definite 'distance' exists between them. Claessens et al. (2016) articulated that as educators and learners work towards a better relationship, their knowledge and understanding of each other improve trust and respect for one another gradually increase or decrease. The willingness to accept authoritative guidance develops over time.

### Access to available information on the school

It became apparent in the semi-structured interviews with parents that they based their school choosing their Grade 1 learner on very limited access to formal information sources. The primary formal information sources are the open days of schools and physical visits to the school. It was also interesting to note that participants visited school websites. The biggest information sources are mainly informal and through 'word of mouth'. Participants seemed to find these more trustworthy as indicated in the response by Parent 5, '… we heard from colleagues whose children are also going there; we weren't aware of the other Afrikaans medium schools. I wasn't even aware that there was such a school'.

Although it was important for this participant to place the child in an Afrikaans medium school, he only gained knowledge about the existence of other Afrikaans medium schools in the area once he had access to the GDE list of allocated schools close to his home. Parent 4 added, 'Basically I went […] to a few schools to enquire also on what it is they can help us with, and how they could accommodate

us'. Other parents needed more information and this is evident in Parent 7's response:

'What facilities they have, how long the schools have existed and visiting the school to see what kind of facilities they have and the mix of students they have are important.'

This participant further indicated to obtain information about the school he said:

'I had conversations with teachers on an open day or a special visit to the school. There is normally a person that will take you through the school, show you how many classes they have what kind of methods they use to encourage learning and also inform you about the number of children they accept and why.'

Other parents were disappointed with the lack of information and Parent 3 articulated the following:

'I never had any information because I did not hear anywhere about the school as I was new to the Centurion area I did not get a referral of some sort. I just googled, I called the school. I managed to get so much information on the school.'

The responses from participants made it clear that parents trust informal information and especially information obtained from other parents who had the experience of the school. A high premium was placed on information gained through informal networks. Parents suggested that prospective parents should speak to parents who have children attending the school or whose children attended the school in the past. This is supported by research carried out by Altenhofen, Berends and White (2016) who argued that parents do rely on their social networks to determine their school choice. According to Bishop, (as cited in Altenhofen et al. 2016), people tend to associate with those who share similar networks, whether by socio-economic status, race, ethnicity, values, age, religion and/or cultural tastes. This information is highly valued by the group. Their study found that there is a difference in access to information between low-income parents and high-income parents, stating that social networks of low-income families may be restricted in the information they can access.

### Good discipline and the safety of their children

Discipline and safety were regarded as key factors influencing a parental decision in school choice. Discipline and safety were regarded as interdependent as the discipline was regarded as a precursor to a safe school environment. In a report on school discipline, according to DBE (2014), it was estimated that bullying in school is as high as 14%. Given these statistics, parents articulate discipline and safety as key factors influencing their school choice-making process. It should also be noticed that parents-related school discipline as a key requirement for a safe schooling environment. It was articulated as follows by Parent 1:

'… you speak to other parents and you hear which schools are good in terms of their discipline. I knew that there was a disciplinary issue; the thing is the school took in more learners than what they could manage – it was not necessarily bad but the school is losing its reputation. That time I said let me give the

school the benefit of the doubt … and now I want to take my children out of the school. I have been there; I have seen it with my own eyes … And the thing is if you look at Grade 1 and Grade 8 with those two grades, you have to go via the online system, so my daughter is no longer in Grade 1 in this school. So now I can look at other schools because I do not have to go via that online system. For me, it is a safety issue and I want to know, what time is break, are the small children separated from the bigger ones, and are supervised during breaks.'

Regarding the safety of their children, Parent 2 decided to take her child out of the school. She indicated:

'My reason for taking him out was how my voicing of my dissatisfaction will affect him if I leave him there. How will they treat him? They will say "Oh this is the trouble-maker's child you know." It was also in terms of protecting him. Teachers don't like parents who come to school to complain about issues like "the child is being bullied" or "being pushed around." Too often, I hear teachers say "Children must grow up and defend themselves." Not in primary schools. I just had to take my child out for his safety.'

It was evident, during the conversations with the parents, that they would exercise their agency and exit the school when they perceived that their children's safety would be compromised. According to Msila (2009:83), parents will also use the safety factor, or rather the lack thereof, to move their children out of their area of residence (Parent 6). It has been shown that safety is a critical factor in determining school choice. In a study on school choice and safety, Deming (2012) found that students who feel safer in schools are more likely to remain enrolled in school and they show modest improvement on a measure of behaviours such as absence and suspensions. Safety at school determines whether a child is benefitting from a quality educational experience (Walter 2012). According to Altenhofen et al. (2016), safety in schools and discipline in schools are often cited as important factors influencing the choice of schools and parents may even consider statistical data from state departments to determine the safety of the school area and the school itself.

### Extra curricular activities and the curriculum

When questioned about curriculum matters, parents placed much emphasis on curriculum and the choice of school. The curriculum is a strong factor for parents. Several parents based their final decision-making on what they understood the curriculum could offer their Grade 1 learner. A notable aspect that was raised by parents was their appreciation of the elements added to the classroom in the curriculum. This appreciation went beyond what the school promised to give in class. This included the extracurricular or as it is known the extramural activities, sport and the support that the school provides for learners who are struggling either with the academic programme or other social aspects. Parent 5 indicated her satisfaction regarding extra-mural activities by stating:

'Where my child has learnt the most is during the extracurricular activities he chose. He enjoyed playing with other children and became very sociable. He even went on to do some science

experiments with friends and he is enjoying it. He is learning a bit of science about the weather, physics and chemistry at his level.' (Participant P1–10)

Parent 10 said: 'This school's curriculum goes beyond the department's policies'. She voiced her view by saying:

'This school where my child is, use the CAPS policy and the Rainbow workbooks. Every day my child comes home with homework to do. Because they are using the national policy, I am glad that they are covering the curriculum.'

Parents were quite satisfied with the curriculum and extramural activities at school as indicated by Parent 7 who voiced her opinion saying:

'My daughter became more open-minded in terms of her thinking they encourage a lot of independent work. They did not handhold kids for too long and even, you know when you start, you see a child has improved when they are interacting with their peers and you could see that her level of acting, of reasoning, is beyond that of her peers … What was great of the school – where a child struggles they make provision for extra classes – and they identify the problem before you can.'

The importance of the curriculum and academic quality of the school choice factor are supported by various research studies. This is also supported by work performed by Altenhofen et al. (2016:2), who commented: One of the parent's main concerns when choosing a school is academic quality. However, the definitions and identifying characteristics of academic quality may be influenced by different variables for different parents. This phenomenon is explained by Altenhofen et al. (2016:2) who stated that 'Sixty-three percent (63%) of parents reported that academics was an important factor in their choice'. This is supported by Burgess et al. (2009) who found that the three main factors that families care about are academic attainment, school socio-economic composition and travel distance. From the given findings, it is evident that parents intend to keep their children in the chosen school because of their 'loyalty' and appreciation of the quality of education in the school (Ntekane 2018).

### Medium of instruction

The medium of instruction was another key determiner of parents exercising their choice of school for their Grade 1 learners. Parents were very articulate about the medium of instruction when choosing schools for their children. Parent 5 stated very eloquently:

'I wanted my child to go to an English medium school. I was not prepared to send my child to a dual medium school. I, therefore, asked around about the schools and what language they were teaching in. It was then that I chose to put my child in the school.'

Parents were very particular about the medium of instruction in their choices and it is clear when Parent 6 stated:

'I wanted to put my child in an Afrikaans medium school. The closest school is an English school. We speak Afrikaans at home and that is why both my children are in an Afrikaans

primary school. I am a firm believer in primary school mother-tongue education so for me, it was great that we could have mother tongue education, but still a good solid foundation for when they grow up one day and I realise that when they go to university they're going to have to converse in English. The standard of English for me was important so the fact that they are doing English first language for me is important.' (Parent 8)

Participants equated the language factor in providing them with the opportunity to access the 'best schools'. According to Evans and Cleghorn (2014), parents also apply language as a factor for making a school choice. In their study, there was a recognition for the importance of mother tongue instruction, especially amongst the younger and slightly better-educated parents, which is the case with the participants in this study. The search for an Afrikaans medium of instruction school amongst the participants, as opposed to the preference of English as the medium of instruction for the others, was notable. Lombard (2007) and Msila (2009) both agreed that parents are very particular regarding the medium of instruction of a school. There is a general focus on English being viewed as the gateway to modernity (Evans & Cleghorn 2014), which motivates parents to enrol their children in schools that are English medium. Heugh (2002) thought that one should not hold an absolute view of English versus the mother tongue.

Based on Hirschman's theory, parents are willing to shop around for better quality schools when they are dissatisfied with the provision of education at a particular school within their residential area. They exercise their options of 'exit', 'voice' and 'loyalty' to ensure that their children receive the best education and as Msila (2009) stated, parents are willing to take their business outside of their vicinity. Evidence from the literature and the findings indicate that parents are willing to exercise their rights and responsibility regarding their children's education.

# Recommendations and conclusion

Through focus and individual group interviews, participants in this study were allowed to share their views on the factors that influenced their choice of school for their Grade 1 learners. The group interviews gave them an opportunity of sharing their views and challenges regarding issues on policies, proximity, curriculum, the language of teaching and learning and extracurricular activities. The following recommendations emanated from the findings: It is recommended that schools design more interactive introductions to their respective schools. Schools must make the open days very informative, as information gained at these events is an important factor that influences parents' choice of schools. Parents should be allowed to 'observe classrooms in action' and meet previous parents (alumni) to share their experiences (Msila 2009).

Regarding the school curriculum, it is recommended that parents should become more aware and involved in what is happening in the whole curriculum of the school (Ntekane 2018). South Africa needs the school curriculum to support the transformation of the country. The school, therefore, has not only a role to play to ensure that it improves the academic ability of children but it also contributes to the dismantling of destructive social behaviours such as racism, violence amongst children and social discrimination amongst others. It is recognised that English is the preferred medium of instruction for parents when choosing a school for their Grade 1 learner. It is recommended that parents demand from schools to offer the indigenous languages with equal status based on the language demographics of the school community. Finally, it is recommended that school leaders should be capacitated to understand and manage schools in a highly complex and diverse society. All schools should be managed in such a manner that learners feel safe in a conducive learning environment (Week 2012). It should also instil discipline by applying methods that encourage social cohesion and social justice amongst the whole school community: the learners, staff and parents. Finally, it is recommended that school leaders should be capacitated to understand and manage schools in a highly complex and diverse society. All schools should be managed in such a manner that learners feel safe in a conducive learning environment. It should also instil discipline by applying methods that encourage social cohesion and social justice amongst the whole school community: the learners, staff and parents.

It is important to note that these factors play itself out in South African schools amidst the desire of the Ministry of Basic Education to ensure that all learners have equal access to education. In an independent review of the transformation of education, GDE emphasised equality. In this research study, a sample of 10 parents presented their challenges and the complexity of choosing a school for their Grade 1 learner as experienced by many parents in South Africa. All parents intended to provide their children with the best learning opportunities. The argument by Woolman and Fleisch (2006) might be that parents, and certainly middle-class parents, do have more access to school choice. However, in practice, it does not mean that the alternatives are equal in quality and social status. This makes the competition for the few schools, which parents regard as 'good' schools so much fiercer. It also resulted, as indicated by myself and the parents, in children being moved from a school where they started during the foundation phase of schooling to access their school of preferred choice by the parents.

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## Competing interests

The authors have declared that no competing interest exists.

## Authors' contributions

All authors contributed equally to this work.

## Ethical considerations

The ethical consideration of this article included obtaining informed consent and maintaining anonymity, confidentiality, privacy, avoidance of betrayal and deception to meet the requirements of the ethical code of conduct. Ethics clearance was obtained from the University of Pretoria Ethics Committee, number EC 17/07/01.

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## Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

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