

Art. #2085, 10 pages, <https://doi.org/10.15700/saje.v42ns1a2085>

## Learner migration at secondary schools in South Africa: Benefits and challenges

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Learner migration, which occurs worldwide, is the voluntary and intentional movement of learners from 1 school to another school of their choice in order to secure better learning opportunities. The study reported on here contributes to the literature on learner migration by focusing on the inequalities caused by racism, benefits and challenges that result from learner migration at selected secondary schools across the 9 provinces of South Africa. Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological theory was used as the theoretical framework to inform a qualitative research inquiry. A purposeful sample of 9 secondary school principals, 27 secondary school learners who migrated and 27 parents of learners who migrated were drawn from across the 9 provinces. Data were collected through semi-structured individual interviews with principals and focus-group interviews with parents and learners. The findings indicate that learner migration provides benefits to learners and their parents through effective principal leadership; sound discipline; quality school facilities and resources; and improved educational opportunities at the receiving schools. However, learner migration is accompanied by several challenges: principals at receiving schools face added administrative and managerial pressure; parents of learners who migrate encounter added financial burdens; and learners who migrate often face arduous travel to and from the receiving school and, in some cases, an intolerant atmosphere at the receiving schools. It is concluded that learner migration is a complex phenomenon requiring effective holistic management.

**Keywords:** benefits; challenges; inequality; learner migration; pulling/pushing factors; quality education; school choice; secondary schools

### Introduction

Learner migration is a worldwide phenomenon which relates to the voluntary and intentional movement of large numbers of learners from one school to another to gain knowledge and skills through improved learning opportunities (Halsey, 2009; Hornby, Cowie & Lewis, 2009). In the South African context, learner migration refers to the movement of learners from predominantly Black township schools to historically White suburban schools, that is, former Model C and independent schools, which served primarily White learners prior to 1994 (Lancaster, 2011; Machard, 2014; Neluvhola, 2007, 2016). Pampallis (2003) adds that learner migration refers to the movement of learners from schools in Black townships on the periphery of South African cities to formerly White schools which are situated in relatively more affluent areas, largely motivated by the belief of Black parents and their children that the latter schools offer education of better quality. Sekete, Shilubani and Moila (2001) define learner movement as the migration of learners from their home areas to schools outside their neighbourhoods. Townships schools are often abandoned due to poor resources, lack of discipline and poor academic performance and learners migrate to the new schools without much knowledge of what this process may entail (Neluvhola, 2007).

Learner migration in South Africa was enabled by educational reform embodied in the South African School's Act (SASA) No. 84 of 1996 (Republic of South Africa [RSA], 1996b) with reference to school admission policies, the abolition of school zones (RSA, 1996b:s. 5(1)) and the National Education Policy Act No. 27 of 1996 ([NEPA] RSA, 1996a). Section 5(1)(a) of the SASA (RSA, 1996b) states that South African learners are able to attend schools of their parent's choice without any restrictions. After the demographic changes following the first democratic elections in 1994, many Black parents, mainly from middle-class backgrounds, moved their children to schools that they perceived to be better-resourced than the schools they were attending (Mbokazi, 2015). The parent's right to school choice was perceived as a measure of realising equality and democratic values (Ntombela, 2013). Furthermore, parents perceived inequality caused by racism as a driving force behind learner migration (Osman, 2009).

### Literature Review

Learner migration is not unique to South Africa. In the United States of America (USA), learner migration is linked to school choice, that is, the practice of allowing parents and learners to choose among the variety of schools available (Doyle & Feldman, 2006) as a way to improve educational options (Salisbury & Tooley, 2005). Colvin (2004) maintains that the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2000 encouraged school choice, school improvement and the creation of better educational opportunities for individual students. In New Zealand, the state policy advocates giving parents opportunities to choose schools for their children (Ladd, 2003). This is done to expand opportunities for poor children and to increase learner achievement. Ladd (2003) argues that the significance of school choice emerges from the notion that different students may have different needs which are accommodated by different schools, in other words, one size does not fit all. In this regard, student learning is

enhanced if parents have control over the choice of schools for their children. In several European countries, such as Belgium, the Netherlands and Ireland, school choice is a constitutional right.

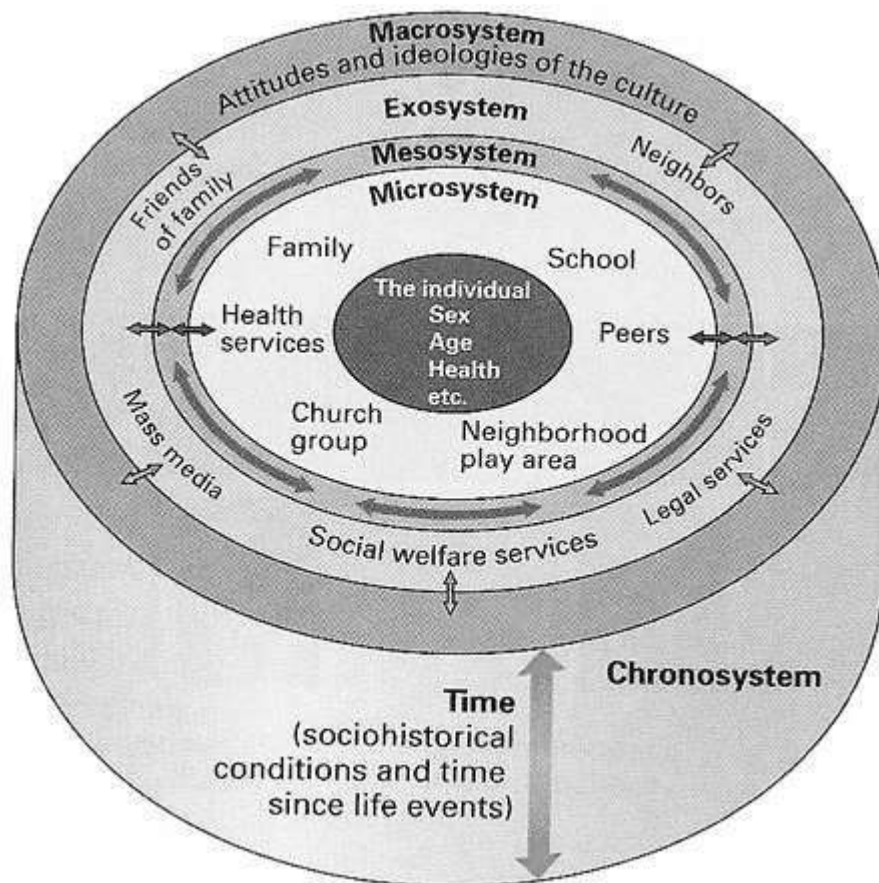
Learner migration occurs across all nine provinces of South Africa. During the apartheid era, learner migration was traditionally the outcome of labour migration and urbanisation trends in response to socio-economic and political factors and not the quality of education offered at a school (Sekete et al., 2001). However, recent developments in education show that learner migration patterns are driven either by a lack of local access to educational opportunities or by the motivation to gain access to educational opportunities that are perceived to be better than those offered by schools attended (Machard, 2014; Sekete et al., 2001). Learner migration follows various patterns: from township schools to other township schools; from township schools to suburban schools historically reserved for White learners; from informal settlement schools to township schools; and from rural schools, including farm schools to urban schools (Msila, 2009). The movement of learners is motivated by parents searching for what they believe is quality education for their children. Many parents seeking employment in cities feel that urban areas are better resourced and offer better opportunities for employment and schooling. Neluvhola (2007) found that learner migration was predominantly from township schools, which serve Black learners, to suburban former Model C schools that served White learners in the previous political dispensation. Excellent Grade 12 results, where most learners pass and many meet the entrance requirements for higher education, a range of extra-curricular activities, sound discipline and good infrastructure in former Model C and independent schools constitute pulling factors from township schools. Other pulling factors are the aspirational dispositions of township youth (Lancaster, 2011) who seek scholastic success and better examination results (Kruger, 2002) in the receiving schools and wish to avoid low achievement due to poor management in the schools that they leave (Mbokazi, 2015). Bisschoff and Koebe (2005) and Maile (2004) add that learners migrate to schools outside their neighbourhood in order to acquire knowledge and skills that will allow them to find good employment. Another contributory factor to learner migration is the increased urbanisation of

Black families since the advent of democracy whereby all apartheid laws were scrapped, including the Group Areas Act, Section 2(1) (Union of South Africa, 1950). This Act enacted under the apartheid government assigned residential and business sections in urban areas according to race, and members from other races were barred from residing, operating businesses, or owning land in them. As a result of the scrapping of this legislation many Black families were able to relocate to former White suburbs and their children enrolled at desegregated suburban schools that had opened their doors to them (Neluvhola, 2007). Notwithstanding positive shifts which have emerged in South African schooling, certain township and rural schools have become consistently well-performing schools which produce outstanding Grade 12 results, learner migration remains ongoing.

Against this background the main research question was formulated as follows: What are the benefits and challenges of learner migration experienced by secondary school principals, learners who migrated and parents of such learners at receiving schools across the nine provinces of South Africa? In light of limiting the extent of the research on learner migration in South Africa to a particular province, the scope of the study was expanded to include schools in all nine provinces. A qualitative inquiry was used to gather data from a purposeful sample of secondary school principals, learners and parents have drawn from one school in each of the nine provinces of South Africa.

#### Theoretical Framework

This study on learner migration is underpinned by Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological model. The theory explains how the individual learner (in the case of this study, the secondary school learner) is influenced by and interacts as well as interrelates with the systems of his/her environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 2005). We considered Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological theory as relevant to learner migration since it shows the importance of acknowledging that the various intertwined environments influence learners to migrate from one school to another. This framework elucidates the various levels of environments, namely the microsystem, the exosystem and the macrosystem, which influence learner migration at various levels (or spheres) (cf. Figure 1).



**Figure 1** Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological model (Tannenbaum, 2018)

The innermost layer or microsystem in Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological model is the closest environment which surrounds the learner and influences him/her directly. The microsystem comprises, inter-alia, the home and the school where the learner spends most of his/her time. The mesosystem refers to the interaction between components of the microsystem. The second level is the exosystem, which surrounds the microsystem and influences the learner in a more indirect manner. The system consists, inter-alia, of the school governing body, the circuit offices and district offices of the Department of Basic Education and the various provincial Departments of Education. The outermost system is known as the macrosystem which comprises general cultural values, customs and laws. Education legislation in the macrosystem influences learner migration and is also particularly relevant. The chronosystem, which denotes prominent internal exchanges in learner's lives may also play a key role in terms of learner migration.

Viewing learner migration from the perspective of the bio-ecological model acknowledges that different environments and their interrelationships influence learner migration. The bio-ecological model shows a learner's interrelated surroundings at the micro-, exo- and macrosystem

levels to offer a meaningful framework for interrogating learner migration in terms of interlinked social strata. The components of the microsystem have a significant and direct influence on the learner as a result of its powerful mesosystemic action between its components, including the family at home, the school, peers, the neighbourhood and the church and other social structures, which play a significant role in effecting learner migration. The microsystem, however, is also linked with the exo- and macrosystem, and it could, therefore, be said that all the spherical systems of Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological model are relevant to the phenomenon of learner migration.

#### **Methodology**

A qualitative research design was adopted to gain an in-depth understanding of the benefits and challenges of learner migration as experienced by principals, learners who migrated and parents of learners who migrated in receiving secondary schools across the nine provinces of South Africa. Purposive sampling was employed as the most appropriate method for selecting information-rich participants (Black, 2010). Nine secondary schools to which large numbers of learners have migrated (i.e., one receiving school per province) were

identified by officials at the different provincial Departments of Education and were as a result thereof, purposively selected. At each school the principal, three parents and three learners who had migrated, were selected as participants. Thus, the sample comprised nine principals, 27 parents and 27 learners who had migrated. Data were collected using semi-structured individual interviews with the principals and focus-group interviews with parents and learners – one focus group per secondary school in each province. A flexible interview guide which allowed further probing and follow-up questions was used. Interviews were recorded and transcribed to provide a complete record of discussions and transcripts were analysed using Tech's method as outlined by Babbie and Mouton (2004). Segments of meaning in the transcribed interviews were identified and coded and categories and sub-categories were identified (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001). Trustworthiness was ensured by transcribing interviews verbatim and triangulating findings among the different participants. Written permission for the research was obtained from the ethics committee of the College of Education, University of South Africa, the nine provincial Departments of Education and all adult participants. Parents of participating learners provided consent and the learners provided assent for their participation. All participants were assured of confidentiality, anonymity and the right to withdraw at any time or refuse to answer questions without penalty (Luman, 2018).

### Findings, Discussions and Analysis

We used qualitative semi-structured interviews to gather data to address the research question. In this section, the findings regarding the benefits and challenges of learner migration are presented and discussed. From the analysis of the data gathered, seven major themes emerged: principals' effective leadership; good disciplinary practice; quality school facilities and resources; improved educational opportunities; challenges for principals; challenges for parents; and challenges for learners.

#### The Benefit of Principals' Effective Leadership

Parent and learner participants agreed that a key benefit of learner migration was the effective leadership practised by principals in the receiving schools; this created an effective school environment and promoted learning and teaching. Professionalism, democratic leadership and diligence were mentioned as outstanding leadership qualities of principals at receiving schools that contributed to the decision to migrate. All participants regarded this as a pulling factor which concurs with the findings of El-Khawas (2004).

Parents who expressed appreciation for effective leadership highlighted professionalism and

democratic leadership. For example, Parent A, Northern Cape, said: *"This one [principal] – we are called to be informed about their plans for the school. We share ideas with the principal, unlike the previous school."* Parent C, Limpopo, acknowledged that the receiving school's principal was a committed professional who knew what he was doing. This parent said: *"Teachers are hardworking; they have catch-up programmes in place to assist learners. The democratic leadership style of the principal is manifested in his day-to-day running of the school."* Principal participants confirmed that they went to lengths to involve parents in the learning process of their children. For example, Parent C, Limpopo said: *"Parents [are encouraged] to make appointments with teachers [who] allow them to visit the school and discuss the progress of their children."*

The parent and learner participants also noted that the principals' effective leadership was related to their approachability, availability and supportiveness. This finding concurs with the literature on effective leadership as the effective principal should exemplify and epitomise participative leadership values in a pedagogical situation through all his/her actions (Neluvhola, 2007). Learner C, Northern Cape, said: *"My principal is very much open and supportive. When we face challenges he is there for us."* This encouraging leadership style was also noted by Parent C, Limpopo, who said: *"I feel free to contact the principal to enquire about the progress of my children."*

Findings indicate that learners want to benefit academically by migrating to schools of excellence and are appreciative of principals who display exemplary leadership qualities which support learner achievement. This is illustrated in the following two comments:

*We have a good principal in my daughter's new school that is smart. We are proud of him and the learners' performance proved that he is a good leader (Parent A, Western Cape).*

*Oh! My principal won the National Teaching Award; he is simply the best principal in South Africa. I am so excited about this great achievement (Learner B, Western Cape).*

Participant narratives show that the core activity of the school, teaching and learning, is actualised by the principal who, together with his/her staff, implements different strategies that benefit the learners. This was recognised by parents as well as learners who were inspired by the outstanding leadership skills of the principals who performed beyond the call of duty and made the receiving school conducive to teaching and learning. Besides effective leadership, qualities and skills, the reputed professional commitment and dedication of the principals in receiving schools undoubtedly is a pulling factor which promotes learner migration. The participants demonstrated that, when parents

and learners heard about the positive learning and teaching culture in the receiving schools managed by effective principals, this was an incentive to make the decision to enrol at those schools.

The relation to Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological model is not difficult to discern. The findings relate to the microsystem in the sense that efficient leadership of school principals at schools can be associated with satisfied parents and this impacts powerfully on the learner at the centre of Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological model. Principals who are ambassadors and models of good management practices and demonstrate effective leadership gain recognition from parents and learners alike.

#### The Benefit of Good Disciplinary Practice

The majority of the participants, principals, parents and learners, confirmed that the implementation of good discipline in receiving schools was a cardinal factor promoting learner migration. It also emerged that a school with a well-developed disciplinary policy, endorsed and implemented by the principal and staff who discipline learners positively, earns the reputation of a good school.

Different participants argued that good discipline was the moral compass of the school. They acknowledged the authority of the teaching staff, who were empowered by a clear, well-developed discipline policy in line with departmental policy. When this policy is implemented consistently and fairly on a daily basis, schools become attractive to potential parents and learners who are considering migration. Principal A, Eastern Cape, explained: *"As a leader, I minimize disciplinary problems by following the correct disciplinary procedure to restore order in the school."*

Most principal participants from the nine provinces were excited to share the disciplinary practices implemented at their various schools. In terms of the importance of good discipline, Principal C, Free State, said:

*We have a code of conduct that we use when dealing with disciplinary challenges. We follow the guidelines according to SASA. When there is a serious problem we have disciplinary measures in place. In serious misconduct, like gangsterism and crime, police are called to the school. This can be one of the pulling factors of learner migration because learners feel safe and secure when they are at school.*

It became apparent from the interviews that an orderly, well-run school environment promotes teaching and learning which, in turn, results in a disciplined milieu. Principal E, Limpopo, stressed how a precisely formulated code of conduct for learner behaviour, which specifies rewards and penalties, is crucial to overall school discipline. *"Discipline in the school is very good. The advocacy [of the] code of conduct and the correct disciplinary*

*procedures that we follow forces, everybody, to behave."*

The result of the study confirm that all the principals of receiving schools had a well-formulated learner code of conduct which cultivated a healthy hierarchical framework for the school as an organisation. This facilitated the implementation of classroom discipline by teachers who were clear on behavioural boundaries for learners and who were supported by a chain of command in the case of learner misbehaviour.

The data clearly show that participants regard discipline as crucial in moulding the behaviour of the learners. Positive behaviour that moulds the learner's character enhances learning habits which in turn enable a learner to engage fully in the learning process. Good discipline was unanimously regarded as a benefit of the receiving schools. Learner B, Free State confirmed. *"I like the school because we all behave properly. The principal is very strict."*

Parent C, Eastern Cape, concurred: *"I am happy with the new school. The teachers are teaching and learners are controlled in a disciplinary manner. Teachers treat learners with respect and attend to their learning challenges."* One learner participant pointed out the difference between her previous teachers and her teachers at the receiving school:

*In our class, the teacher keeps us busy the whole day, and all the teachers want to see our work, unlike my previous school where the teachers were just teaching us two periods without writing and not checking our books. (Learner B, Mpumalanga)*

The above quotations demonstrate the importance of discipline as a benefit to learners who have migrated and to their parents. The results of the study reveal that principals who clearly communicate codes of conduct to the learners obtain good discipline and this is a pulling factor which promotes learner migration. According to Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological model, healthy micro-systematic interaction between learners and the teaching staff positively impact the learner's development at the centre of Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological model.

#### The Benefit of Quality School Facilities and Resources

Participants argued that many township schools were characterised by resource inadequacy such as a lack of libraries, school halls, computers, laboratory equipment and sports fields (McKay, Mafanya & Horn, 2018; Soudien, 2007). They brought to light that improved school facilities and resources in receiving schools were powerful pulling factors in learner migration. Learner A, Gauteng, made it clear that the provision of a laboratory at the receiving school (a former Model C school) to which he migrated made a big difference to his formal education. He said: *"Unlike my previous school where everything was*

*theoretical, oh! I now enjoy science.*” Learner B, Western Cape, commented on the benefit of a well-stocked library: *“We have a library that is user-friendly. I also enjoy reading books from the library.”* A comparison of resources in schools from which learners migrated and the new school was also highlighted.

*In my previous school it was difficult to find a storybook, but now books are easily accessible* (Learner A, Eastern Cape).

Another benefit of receiving schools was the positive teacher-learner ratio. Participants highlighted the absence of overcrowding as follows:

*In my previous school, we were about to 86 in the class whereas, in this new one, we are 34 in a class* (Learner C, KwaZulu-Natal).

*Our classes have about 35 learners in math lessons and not more than 25 learners in science classes and in all other subjects they are not more than 45 learners in the class* (Learner A, North West).

Bronfenbrenner’s bio-ecological model postulates that the exosystem and macrosystem determine what occurs in the everyday life of a learner. The Department of Basic Education at the macrosystem level would be responsible for the overhead provision of resources at schools. The relation to the exosystem concerning better facilities at schools as a reason for learner migration relates to the provincial departments and school governing bodies in the exosystem which take direction from the national Department of Basic Education. The school governing body, a forum in the exosphere in which the learner is not a participant in schools, in turn, affects outcomes at the school in the microsphere. A lack of facilities negatively affects the learner’s development and sometimes leads to learner migration, while better facilities at schools promote learners’ healthy development.

#### The Benefit of Improved Educational Opportunities

It emerged from the interviews that principal participants from all the provinces agree with parents and learners that receiving schools are perceived as providing opportunities for improved education. This constitutes a key benefit of learner migration. All participants agreed that the curriculum offered by former Model C and independent schools creates an incentive by providing various streams from which learners can make a wide subject selection. Principal F, Mpumalanga, said: *“When the learner reaches the entry level, which is Grade 10, he/she is able to choose a stream that will enable him/her to follow the career path of his/her choice.”* The view was reinforced by Principal H, North West, who commented as follows: *“I think one of the reasons that learners are migrating to our school is that we are a school of excellence. Yes, we offer good education and the best curriculum around here.”*

Learners agreed that the range of subjects offered by the receiving schools was of paramount

importance. Learner A, Western Cape, noted: *“The learners are migrating in large numbers because of the subjects we are offering, namely; math and physical science.”* Learner C, from the same school, confirmed this view: *“I came to this school when I was in Grade 8. This school is at a better level than other schools in Math and Science.”* Principal B, Gauteng, pointed out that a diversified school curriculum offered by receiving schools opens doors to any career path a learner may wish to follow: *“The reason learners are migrating to our school in large numbers is that we offer all science subjects, music, computer literacy and consumer studies.”* It emerged that schools are diversified to meet the expectations of the communities as mentioned by Principals A (Eastern Cape) and B (Gauteng). This point was stressed by both learners and parents. Learners identified the commercial subjects which opened the way for careers in business that relate to the commercial stream offered (Learner C, KwaZulu-Natal, and Learner A, Northern Cape). This concurred with Parent B, Gauteng, who was of the view that studying commercial subjects translated into future job opportunities. Furthermore, findings indicate that learners who migrated to these schools excelled in these subjects. The misconception that mathematics and science are generally regarded as “killers” or scarce skills subjects was negated during the interviews. Learner participants believed that they would negate this mammoth misconception in the new supportive environment. This was reinforced by Principal E, Limpopo, and Principal A, Eastern Cape, who are dedicated to the rigorous teaching of these subjects.

Another aspect of the curriculum that was greatly appreciated by learner and parent participants was the extramural curriculum of the receiving schools. According to Learner A, North West, the school had the “best way” or philosophy of doing things which allowed learners to benefit beyond the classroom. She illustrated this by referring to opportunities that the school offered over and above the formal curriculum: *“Our choir goes national; we compete beyond the borders of our province.”* This kind of activity and many others like it are of great value in cultivating a positive school culture and in extending learners’ horizons who develop self-confidence in performing in the arts. These performances also serve to market the school, thereby acting as a further recruitment drive for learner migration. Other extracurricular courses such as drama and computer lessons are major pulling factors for learner migration. One principal mentioned sport activities which are a powerful drawcard. *“We offer good education here, it is versatile, and over and above we have different sporting activities in the afternoons, which learners enjoy very much”* (Principal B, Gauteng). These diverse activities impact positively on learner migration.

The findings link with Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological model at the micro- and macrosystem level. The national Department of Basic Education, at a macrosystem level, prescribes the curriculum for the principals and their school management teams in the exosystem. It also links with the microsystem level since the learner, who finds him/herself at the inner level of Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological theory, is the beneficiary of the subjects taught at the new school. These subjects benefit his/her development and way of thinking. The learner is not, however, a passive recipient but helps to construct the bio-ecological system in a reciprocal manner by his/her participation in the curriculum and extramural curriculum of the school.

#### Challenges for Principals Created by Learner Migration

Notwithstanding the positive themes dealt with in the foregoing sections, learner migration also posed particular challenges to participants. Principals experience pressure from the provincial Department of Education, parents and learners regarding the management of learner admission. In compliance with the Department of Basic Education's admission policy, principals of receiving schools are expected to adhere to this standard admission policy. Simultaneously, principals are faced with a deluge of prospective learners who turn up in large numbers at their schools to seek admission.

In light of this challenge, principals have to devise innovative ways to address the demand for admission. Well-laid and proactive management plans are often disrupted by learner migration. The situation also makes it difficult to determine and balance the number of teaching posts and resources needed for the following year. Principal J, Western Cape, said: *"It is difficult; you can't plan."*

Interviews with principals indicated that schools experienced a high volume of applications from learners who wished to migrate. This means that principals, together with administrative staff, have to work overtime. Some learners are placed on a waiting list for the next year. In such a situation, Principal C, Gauteng, elaborated on how she simplified the administrative challenge of learner migration. Her school has developed a strategy of grouping learners' application forms for admission on an A list, which depicts learners from feeder areas, and a B list, which contains the names of learners beyond feeder areas.

Learners and parents explained other dimensions of the problem. Administrative challenges are caused by parents who do not apply to school on time. Learner A, Limpopo, commented: *"To get admission to this school was not easy, my uncle queued on my behalf the whole night."* This statement illustrates that the boy's uncle, who applied at the last moment, had to queue the entire night to get admission to a school which is perceived

to be the best in the province. The long queues result in night vigils by parents and relatives anxious at having learners admitted to receiving schools.

Furthermore, learner migration create problems in the day-to-day running of the school. Many learners who migrated were forced to travel long distances to receiving schools and late-coming and fatigue posed a serious challenge to principals and teachers. Principal H, Mpumalanga, said: *"We encounter problems with the bus. Learners sometimes arrive late for lessons ... in the morning some [learners] are late; they must be bussed back home. It is a problem."*

Furthermore, based on the analysis, principals experienced management challenges when parents of migrating learners who live far from schools fail to attend meetings regularly due to the long distances. Working parents of learners who have migrated can seldom attend meetings due to loaded schedules at their workplace and expenses created by travel. This compromises the valuable role of parents, as enshrined in the SASA, who are primary stakeholders in the education of their children. A lack of parental involvement jeopardises the principal's managerial tasks, which should be informed by views held by the parents of learners who have migrated. This challenge relates mainly to a weakness in the meso-systematic relationship between the school and parents and work-related challenges in the exosphere, which negatively influence relations between home and school.

#### Challenges for Parents Created by Learner Migration

The findings also indicate that, in spite of the benefits experienced by learners and the satisfaction voiced by parents about receiving schools, parents in all the provinces experienced financial pressures created by higher school fees required by former Model C and independent schools. Parent participants who registered their children in former Model C schools made sacrifices by spending a large part of their income on their children's education. In addition, the transport and uniforms required by the new school were expensive as is illustrated in this comment: *"I do not always attend meetings; it's too expensive to travel 150 km. I usually phone the principal if I want to find out my child's progress"* (Parent C, Gauteng). Furthermore, grandparents or relatives who live close to the receiving school foster learners who have migrated or provide accommodation to them, experience financial burdens. Parent A, Limpopo, said: *"My children are staying with my mother. I would not [be able to] afford to pay for their daily transport."*

In terms of Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological system, financial burdens relate to widespread poverty in the exosystem which is not addressed adequately in the macrosystem. Consequently, an inadequate mesosystemic interrelationship between

parents and their children who lodge with relatives far away may occur. Where learners who have migrated live apart from their parents, parents miss their children as this comment demonstrates: *“My children are staying with my brother; they only visit during school holidays. I sometimes miss them”* (Parent D, Limpopo).

The findings indicate that some principal participants are not happy with the lack of parental care of learners who have migrated to their schools. Principal C, Free State, said: *“When learners are naughty we call the biological parent to appear before the disciplinary committee. Sometimes parents are not aware that their children are naughty as they sometimes stay with relatives.”*

Thus, the relationship between children and their primary educators, the parents, is sometimes strained as a result of learner migration. Learner migration may result in the separation of children from their parents as they stay in hostels or with relatives and this affects the bond between them. Furthermore, challenges related to parental care as a result of learner migration indicate constrained mesosystematic relations in Bronfenbrenner’s bio-ecological system.

#### Challenges for Learners who Migrate

Learners who migrated to new schools struggled with the distance of the school from their homes. Travelling as far as 150 km to and from school every day was tiresome and time-consuming to Learner A, Mpumalanga, and Learner C, Limpopo. Learner B, KwaZulu-Natal mentioned that travelling long distances sometimes made him late for lessons and exhausted him. He got up very early in the morning and arrived home late in the afternoon. Based on this finding, fatigue would negatively impact teaching and learning. One participant finished his homework during the afternoon study session at school because he was too tired by the time he reached home. Long tiring trips can be related to components of the microsystem, the home and the school, which, due to their physical distance from each other, adversely affected the learners’ development.

Furthermore, the findings reveal that learners sometimes experienced racism at the receiving school. Learner A, Eastern, Cape said: *“My friend was pushed during the break by a White boy who said he stood in his way and mentioned the ‘K-word’.”* Learner C, Limpopo, confirmed: *“You know, Mam, during our athletics competitions, we decided to go and stand under a tree, when this group of White boys came. They told us the shade is only for Whites.”* Interviews with learners revealed racial discrimination at some of the schools to which learners had migrated. Further revelations demonstrate that effective measures to address racism are still lacking in some receiving schools; racial discrimination at schools relates to learners of different cultural groups who clash, shortcomings in

the consistent application of disciplinary measures and a deficient school policy and mission in this regard in the microsphere.

#### Conclusions and Recommendations

With this study, we focused on the benefits and challenges of learner migration. The findings demonstrate the complexity of the phenomenon of learner migration. It is unfortunate that the major causes of inequality in South Africa are mainly located within the political economy of the country rather than the education system. If schools were transformed to be more equitable, this would minimise learner migration. Not only does learner migration have benefits, but it also creates various challenges for principals, parents and learners. Benefits include the principals’ effective leadership, good disciplinary practice, quality school facilities and resources, and improved educational opportunities. In order to facilitate learner migration certain challenges should be addressed. Principals require administrative support when forecasting and planning enrolments for the next year(s). Learner migration means that schools are inundated with applications from parents whose children wish to migrate from feeder schools, ranging from schools situated in close proximity to the receiving schools to schools beyond provincial borders. Principals are required to devise ways to cope effectively and fairly with the admission of new learners. Parents face the burden of financial pressures in order to cope with higher school fees, transport costs and hostel or private accommodation if learners choose schools far from home. Learners may pay a price in terms of arduous travelling if they live far from the receiving schools, and in some cases, living apart from parents and an unwelcome atmosphere in some schools due to racial or cultural differences also take its toll. Finally, the findings show that the phenomenon of learner migration across nine provinces can only be understood if it is considered holistically in terms of both benefits and challenges.

Based on the findings we would like to recommend that more active, hands-on and sensitive leadership is required in receiving schools to cope with administrative challenges as well as assisting new learners to adjust to the new school environment. Any hint of discrimination in receiving schools should be actively and intentionally addressed by the school leadership in order to provide an equitable and invitational school environment for migrant learners. Therefore, the Department of Basic Education should capacitate principals accordingly. Secondly, learner migration is an established phenomenon and parents have the legal right to take their children to any school of their choice. Thus, we recommend that a coherent system of policies should be developed by the Department of Basic Education to manage learner migration. Furthermore, the structuring of a learner



migration database through the South African School Management and Administration System (SASAMS) would inform the availability of places in various schools in different circuits and facilitate admissions, thus managing learner migration more effectively. Issues around poor resources and infrastructure in disadvantaged schools should be addressed by the Department in an ongoing manner. Currently, the provincial Departments are improving schools at a very slow pace. This should be fast-tracked so that township and rural schools can offer better facilities and retain their learners.

### Authors' Contributions

TGN wrote the article; AEVZ was the supervisor and LLM attended to the technical aspects. All authors reviewed the final manuscript.

### Notes

- i. This article is based on the doctoral thesis of Tintswalo Grace Neluvhola.
- ii. Published under a Creative Commons Attribution Licence.
- iii. DATES: Received: 25 January 2020; Revised: 23 March 2022; Accepted: 21 December 2022; Published: 31 December 2022.

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