

SUCCESS IS A FAR AWAY PLACE

Kids on a long journey to a better education

THABISO THAKALI

LONG before the crack of dawn Reabetswe Rakubu has "a rude awakening" from his mother – she wakes him to prepare for his extraordinary journey to school.

For the seven-year-old, who is in Grade 2 at Hillcrest Primary in Malvern, it takes a good few minutes to get the morning creaks out, says his mother, Tsietso.

Each day, Reabetswe makes a round trip from Dobsonville in Soweto to Malvern, in the east of Joburg, travelling almost 56km by minibus taxi to school and back. But this long journey and the extra expenses – including R3 500 in school fees a year, R1 000 for uniform and books and R600 a month for transport – is a small price to pay, according to Tsietso.

"We made the decision to send him to the school there because we wanted him to obtain the best education we could afford," she says. "The criteria we used to select the school for him were based on how well-resourced the school was and its reputation in producing good results."

Wearing his school uniform, bag strapped to his back, Reabetswe excitedly heads off to catch a 5am taxi to school. But before he joins his fellow pupils onboard, he complains to his parents because they refuse to give him the pocket money he wants.

"Come let's go, you are running behind time. Your transport is waiting," Tsietso says as she hurries him to the taxi.

"He struggled to wake up when he first started at school but I think he is now getting used to it. He knows that he has to wake up at 4.30am every morning."

In this part of Joburg, it is not unusual for pupils like Reabetswe to wake up before dawn for the long journey to school. Many children in townships even walk or run almost 5km to school every day.

Nearly an hour-and-a-half after he climbed into the taxi outside his home, Reabetswe is no closer to school. The taxi driver has gone in circles collecting other children in the township.

The children's taxi ride often becomes an extension of their night's sleep, says their driver.

"It is a journey that many, especially the young ones like Reabetswe, don't really get to see all the way," he says, giving his name as Clement. "By the time we hit the freeway most of them will have dozed off to catch up on some much-needed sleep. I often have to wake some of them up outside their school gates."

A study measuring children's daily travel to school between Soweto and Joburg has revealed how



PASSING THE TIME: Seven-year-old Reabetswe Rakubu from Hillcrest Primary School in Malvern plays with his friends inside the school taxi that takes them daily from Dobsonville in Soweto to their respective schools in Joburg. Below, Reabetswe says goodbye to his mother at 5am and finally arrives at school in time for class.

PICTURES: PABALLO THEKISO



parents use school choice and travel to improve the quality of their children's education.

The study, by Development Pathways for Health Research at Wits University, found that children who travelled further "typically attended well-resourced and better-performing schools".

"Children travelling greater distances to school are typically travelling from homes in township areas to historically advantaged schools in suburban Johannesburg," it says.

"This typically requires substan-

tial economic investment, to cover transport costs and higher fees, as well as extensive parental involvement to obtain a place for a child in a school, and to organise transport."

Julia de Kadt, the main author of the study for her PhD, says parents are making huge investments in education and travel costs for their children. "We found that very few children in Soweto attend schools near their parents' homes," she says. "They are not just accepting the closest school to home. Children who attended schools close to home,

but not the nearest possible school, were more likely to live in a particularly disadvantaged area."

De Kadt says her study used data obtained from Birth to Twenty Cohort Study, research based on children who were born in Soweto between April and May 1990.

She analysed the data for each of the 1 428 children selected from the sample to look at their primary schooling, their families' wealth and the distances they travelled to school.

Her study found that only 40 per-

cent of children attended a school in the same suburb as their home and only 20 percent went to the school closest to their home.

She says children travelling substantial distances to school are more likely to come from relatively well-off families, and to have relatively well-educated mothers.

"Children's access to high-quality education is one of the core determinants of their educational attainment and economic wellbeing in later life. Families are often willing to make substantial investments in pur-

suit of the best possible educational opportunities for their children."

However, De Kadt says the long-term implications of children travelling longer distances for better education are yet to be studied properly. That Soweto parents choose distant schools means schools in Soweto are struggling.

"The results of this research highlight the value South African families and children attribute to education," she adds. "Additional research on the motivations for school choice and the implications

Kids adapt well to change

MOVING house from one area to another can have a positive influence on children's lives, researchers have found.

A study by Wits University's Developmental Pathways for Health Research Unit, which explored the patterns of residential mobility, found that moving home does not prejudice children's educational progression or potential for achievement.

The research said while moving had potential for improved living conditions, it could also result in inequality and vulnerability.

The research revealed that nearly two-thirds of children (64 percent) had moved home at least once by the time they reached the age of 15.

"Mobility was found to be more likely among those children whose mothers or caregivers had no formal education and who lived in poorer households, suggesting that residential movement within this group of children was more common in the context of disadvantage," said the study.

"However, the consequences of such movement were somewhat unexpected.

"The results of the research showed no evidence that residential mobility impacted negatively on children's progression through school and, to the contrary, children who had moved home appeared to achieve higher scores in a numeracy and literacy evaluation."

The research explored the patterns of residential mobility within a group of Joburg-Soweto based children over a 15-year period and its overall – and unexpected – findings suggest that children are resilient and adaptable to change. – Thabiso Thakali

of substantial travel to school for young children is urgently needed to determine the best possible policy response for South Africa."

Outside Hillcrest Primary School, three hours after he left home, Reabetswe displays few signs of fatigue. He delightedly and playfully runs up the stairs, waving to the taxi driver as he prepares to depart, urging him to return to pick them up after school.

At work and equally happy that Reabetswe has arrived safely at school on time, Tsietso frankly admits to anxieties. "The progress of the school was a huge factor in deciding to send him there, although I usually feel bad whenever I disrupt his sleep," she says. "It is difficult and quite frankly as a parent there is always apprehension about the time he spends on the road."

While at crèche, Reabetswe would wake up at 7am and enjoyed a lot of playtime after school.

"Now he comes back from school around 4pm and when he arrives home he has to go to my mother's house to do his homework until I arrive from work," she explains. "I have to make sure that he goes to bed at 8pm so he can get enough rest for the next day. But I think the quality of education he will get will outweigh everything else."