

# Diversity or proximity?

The factors behind attitudes to children's school assignments

Deciding which school children will attend is an important decision for both communities and families in the United States. Two key viewpoints are prevalent in this context. The first viewpoint is concerned with supporting school diversity and seeks to assign children to schools in a way that balances income and achievement levels. The second viewpoint emphasises the proximity of the school to the homes of children and seeks to assign children to schools in their local neighbourhood. Dr Toby L. Parcel, from North Carolina State University, investigated individual and family factors associated with school assignments in Wake County, North Carolina.

Over the past 20 years, decisions about where children should go to school have become an increasingly important topic within the United States educational system. Research on this topic has largely focused on the outcomes of attending a particular school for children, such as the impact on diversity and educational achievement. There has been less attention paid to the factors which influence school choice. Dr Toby L. Parcel and colleagues sought to investigate the impact of gender and other individual and family characteristics on school assignment decisions in Wake County, North Carolina. This research makes an important contribution to current debates in the US around diversity, school segregation and school choice.

## COMPETING CULTURAL MODELS OF SCHOOL ASSIGNMENT

A neighbourhood schools model proposes that children attend schools close to their homes. Traditionally, children in a particular area will attend

social capital is achieved due to the close proximity of the school to the home. The short distance between the home and the school makes it easier for parents to attend school events, volunteer in the classroom and meet with teachers. The neighbourhood model also facilitates a greater understanding of the school system amongst parents and thus promotes social capital at home. "Bonding" social capital is also built by the neighbourhood model. The close proximity of the school to the home reduces the time taken travelling to school for both parents and children and thus maximises the time spent at home. As a majority of neighbourhood children will attend the same schools, their connections at school reinforce neighbourhood ties and vice versa, which strengthens community social capital.

Neighbourhood schools are less advantageous for ethnic minority groups or those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, whose neighbourhood

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a particular elementary school, middle school and high school. Children from the same family will thus successively attend the same schools and have some of the same teachers. This pattern may even extend across generations in smaller communities. This model is well established as a cultural ideal and is thus perceived as being favourable by many parents and adults generally.

The neighbourhood model allows parents to establish strong relationships with these schools. This is referred to as building "bridging" social capital between parents and schools. Bridging

schools often lack the same resources as schools in more affluent neighbourhoods. Neighbourhood schools thus run the risk of maintaining segregation within schools and exacerbating the economic and social inequalities of neighbourhoods. Historically, court orders to desegregate schools have attempted to prevent this reproduction of inequality, although some areas have been re-segregated.

In the diversity model, districts assign students, at least partially, to achieve diversity within schools. This model also builds social capital across racial and socioeconomic groups. Proponents



The neighbourhood school model reduces time spent travelling to school.



The diversity model prioritises achieving diversity across students within schools.

of the diversity model suggest that children's exposure to peers of different racial, ethnic or socioeconomic backgrounds helps to establish their character, sense of worldliness and acceptance of diversity. Children from all backgrounds benefit socially from these schools because these experiences provide a foundation for positive racial attitudes in adulthood and can thus improve race relations over time.

Previous research has highlighted the importance of examining the long-term impact of school desegregation, including children from minority and less affluent backgrounds being immersed in high achieving contexts. Desegregated schools can thus provide both social and academic benefits for children.

## EMOTIONAL CAPITAL AND SCHOOL ASSIGNMENT

Parents take responsibility for socialising their children and preparing them for adulthood. This means that the family typically determines where children live, where they go to school, as well as the amount of financial, social and cultural capital that is invested into each child. Parents often make considerable effort

to become knowledgeable about children's school choices. This can be conceptualised as one aspect of familial "emotional capital." Previous research investigating emotional capital and school assignment has tended

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to use qualitative research methodology. Dr Parcel and colleagues have built upon this research tradition by conducting interviews in addition to using quantitative methods in analysing influential factors in parental school assignment choices.

## THE CASE OF WAKE COUNTY, NORTH CAROLINA

Wake County provides a useful context for the study of influential factors in school assignments. The area has traditionally harboured progressive values on social and educational dimensions and has never been under court order

to desegregate its schools. It is centrally located in North Carolina and has become relatively prosperous, in part due to investment in high-tech industry beginning in the 1950s.

Prior to 2000, the county was able to fairly easily keep up with population growth. However,

at the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, increasing numbers of new people arrived from other states, attracted by the low taxes, employment opportunities, a favourable climate and strong schools. This made it difficult for schools to accommodate these children, which was made more challenging by court orders preventing race being used as a basis for school assignment. Instead, diversity of socioeconomic status was favoured, with limitations being placed upon the number of children eligible for free school lunches and children with lower than average reading ability being placed in each



The diversity model proposes that exposure to peers from different backgrounds is beneficial to all children.



school. A lack of funding for building new schools also contributed to the challenge of accommodating these children.

To achieve these objectives, two strategies were employed: accelerating a system of student reassignment to different schools and mandating that some children attend year-round schools. The first of these strategies resulted in children being moved multiple times during their school years. The second of these involved children attending schools where terms are shorter, with more frequent and shorter breaks so that school stretches across the whole year. These strategies were not universally accepted by parents, resulting in a shift in the Wake County School Board from liberal (Democratic) to conservative (Republican). One of the new board's first acts was to abolish the previous diversity policy. Successive boards have continued to negotiate between diversity or neighbourhood models for school assignment policies.

#### QUALITATIVE FINDINGS ON SCHOOL ASSIGNMENTS

Dr Parcel and colleagues conducted interviews with 24 opinion leaders in Wake, including former school board members, members of the business community and school activists. The interview sample included both those who favoured diversity and those who favoured neighbourhood models. Respondents in favour of diversity were concerned that the educational progress achieved by children from minority and low socioeconomic backgrounds would be hampered if schools were allowed to resegregate. They were keen to

**Mothers perceived more challenges, dangers and uncertainty around school assignment than fathers, suggesting that negative emotional capital is gendered.**

continue the diversity policy to ensure economic progress for the county as a whole. These individuals feared that new businesses would avoid locating in Wake County if potential residents could not be assured of good schools throughout

the jurisdiction. Respondents in favour of neighbourhood schools were primarily concerned with the disadvantages of school board implementation strategies. They perceived moving children around different schools as disruptive to both their education and friendships as well as being difficult for families due to uncertainty of the reassignment process.

#### QUANTITATIVE FINDINGS ON SCHOOL ASSIGNMENTS

Dr Parcel and colleagues also conducted a survey of Wake County adults' preferences for school assignment policy, with an oversample of African Americans.

Researchers investigated preferences for diversity and neighbourhood schools and three measures of negative social capital (parental

challenge of children's reassignments, perceived dangers to children from reassignments and the uncertainty associated with the reassignment process). Results showed that mothers were more supportive than fathers of

Parents' attitudes to school assignments and reassignments varied between mothers

both diversity and neighbourhood school assignments. Mothers also perceived more challenges, dangers and uncertainty around school assignment than fathers, suggesting that negative emotional capital is gendered.

Results also revealed that some household factors exacerbate women's concerns. Mothers in households with longer work hours were less supportive of diversity and mothers with more school-age children felt more favourably towards neighbourhood schools. Additional resources in dual-earner households, higher income and education helped to protect against challenges, dangers and uncertainty of school reassignment. Higher levels of socioeconomic resources thus protect mothers from the key dimensions of negative emotional capital. However, longer work hours and having more school-age children exacerbate differentiation between those favouring diversity and those favouring neighbourhood schools. These factors also contribute to an increased perception of challenges and dangers of school reassignments.

African American respondents were more supportive of diversity and less supportive of neighbourhood schools. They also expressed fewer concerns about the challenges, dangers and uncertainty of reassignment. Republicans and the unaffiliated were less supportive of diversity and more supportive of neighbourhood schools. Republicans also perceived greater dangers of reassignments. Parents with more school-age children were more concerned with dangers of school reassignments. However, the number of children did not predict preferences for diversity or neighbourhood schools. Households where both parents worked were less supportive of neighbourhood schools and worried less about dangers of reassignments than households where one parent worked. This is likely because dual-earner households have more resources available to mitigate the perceived dangers of school reassignment.



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#### APPLYING RESEARCH FINDINGS TO OTHER AREAS

Dr Parcel and colleagues have also compared research findings from Wake to over 20 other urban and suburban communities in the US. The original survey was also replicated in four other locales: Charlotte, Nashville, Louisville and Rock Hill to explore attitudes towards diversity and neighbourhood schools in these areas. Concerns with diversity, neighbourhood schools, challenges, dangers and uncertainties were similar across all areas studied. Such findings help to inform current debates in the US regarding diversity, school resegregation and school choice.

#### CONCLUSIONS

This research demonstrates that gender, work and family circumstances and political attitudes are all important in understanding preferences for both diversity and neighbourhood models for

school assignments. Interestingly, despite heated debates about diversity versus neighbourhood schools, these were not found to be diametrically opposed. For example, mothers favoured both diversity and neighbourhood schools more than fathers. Such findings demonstrate the power of each of these cultural models, one emphasising the value of diversity and the other highlighting the importance of neighbourhood schools. Findings have shown that the three components of negative emotional capital are heavily gendered, with mothers perceiving more challenges, dangers and uncertainty of school reassignment. This demonstrates the reproduction of gender relations over time. Despite the increase in men taking on household responsibilities, this research highlights that women continue to take on more of the burden of organising children's school assignments.



# Behind the Research

## Dr Toby L. Parcel

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**W:** [www.uncpress.org/book/9781469622545/the-end-of-consensus/](http://www.uncpress.org/book/9781469622545/the-end-of-consensus/)

### Research Objectives

Dr Toby L. Parcel's work at North Carolina State University focuses on school assignments in the United States.

### Detail

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#### Bio

Toby L. Parcel is Professor of Sociology at North Carolina State University. Her research concerns the interrelationships among family, education and work as institutions, particularly their effects on children. She has published in leading sociological journals and is currently serving as a Director of the Sociology Program at the National Science Foundation.

#### Funding

Dr Parcel's work has been supported by the National Science Foundation and North Carolina State University.

#### Collaborators

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### References

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### Personal Response

#### **Where do you see the focus of your research in the next five years?**

// We need to know more regarding whether findings from Wake County, North Carolina replicate in other parts of the upper South. We know that the same dimensions of sentiment regarding school assignments – support for diversity and for neighbourhood schools, and concerns with the challenges, dangers and uncertainties of school reassignments – operate in Charlotte, Louisville, Rock Hill and Nashville as well as Raleigh (Wake County). But we need to study whether determinants of these attitudes are similar by area. We also need to know more about who supports various forms of school choice, especially charter and magnet schools. //

#### **What inspired your work in this area?**

// I grew up in the northeastern part of the United States, where public school attendance was organised by town or township. When I moved to Raleigh in 2006, it was interesting to learn that such schools were organised county-wide, a more common model in the South and West. The public debate in 2009 regarding neighbourhood versus diverse schools caught my attention because only in larger jurisdictions such as counties or large cities does this question arise. The fervour of sentiment on each side suggested that some citizens felt the social capital they had built with current schools was threatened by both reassignments and diversity goals. I also wondered how typical such debates were in other parts of the South and the United States generally. The project grew from there. //