



## School proximity and sustainable education in Doda district of Jammu and Kashmir

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### Abstract

The article aims to assess the relationship between school proximity and quality education. Apart from socioeconomic inequalities, students are also placed in disadvantaged positions due to regional disparity, and locational disadvantage which hinders their equitable access to education. Keeping in view UNESCO's idea of sustainable and inclusive education this paper presents the case of Higher Secondary School, Malothi of District Doda in Jammu and Kashmir. It aims to analyze how distance influences academic performance and educational sustainability. By analyzing the data of hundred students of the HSS, Malothi the paper brings out the specific challenges and barriers that students residing in remote areas face while attempting to participate in sustainable education practices. Some suggestions for policy changes or program adjustments based on findings have been provided towards the end of this paper to enhance sustainable education practices for students in Malothi regardless of their distance from the school.

**Keywords:** Access, Barriers, Education, Performance, School Distance, Students, Sustainable, Transportation.

### Introduction

Since the early twentieth century, there has been a growing interest of scholars in studying various aspects and implications of proximity. Beginning with geography, there has been a great integration of the social-economic as well as environmental aspects into proximity studies. In sociology, 'proximity studies' have their roots in Chicago School, and from there it has emerged as a critical tool for uncovering various aspects of social life and the inequalities and vulnerabilities. Proximity research also helps in understanding how spatial relationships influence our lives. It further becomes more relevant due to the complex socio-spatial dynamics.

In the field of education, proximity studies have proven to be quite relevant as they offer many valuable insights into how spatiality can influence educational outcomes for students and foster inequalities not only within the educational system but also in the following domains of life. UNESCO in its mission to promote equity in education recognizes spatial disparity as one of the blockers in its mission. Proximity to institutions, educators, infrastructure, and educational resources can all negatively influence the students and their learning experience and impact the overall quality of the learners. UNESCO has clearly shown a deep commitment to ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all. By 2030, UNESCO's goal is to ensure inclusive and quality education, by investing in teacher training, improving infrastructure, and addressing barriers to access, particularly for marginalized and vulnerable populations.

India by following the various components of SDGs has taken proactive steps to establish parity in the field of education by opening public schools in remote areas and providing access to children of all social strata, demonstrating a commitment to providing education and addressing the basic right of children to access quality education. Access to education has been one of the greatest

barriers to many in India, especially those from vulnerable social backgrounds. By establishing a variety of schools and schooling systems (for instance, the concept of mobile schools for far-flung communities and the mobile populations) in far-flung areas with limited transportation and communication technology, India is working towards achieving the targets of Sustainable Development Goal 4. As per the most recent data (2022), there are nearly 14,89,115 (12.34 lakhs in rural areas and 2.54 lakhs in urban areas) schools in India having 26,52,35,830 children enrolled. In 2022, India recorded Primary (11,96,265) secondary (1,50,452), and Higher secondary (1,42,398) schools a bit lower than in 2021 which together constitute 15,09,136 (<https://ezyschooling.com>). In 2023, India recorded nearly 1.5 million schools. However, significant lags remain.

The Indian education system has lots of challenges which include inadequate infrastructure, shortage of teachers, drop-out rate, digital divide, access to institutions due to several deprivations and discriminations, access to technology, and concerns of quality education which are crucial for improving educational outcomes and equitable access.

Proximity or distance from educational institutions especially for those in remote areas is one of the greatest barriers that hinder their access to education. This puts them at an additional disadvantage as compared to their urban counterparts hailing from well-developed regions. Many students then also face challenges such as lack of transportation or inadequate transportation, ill-maintained roads, and lack of other essential services and facilities which can facilitate dropout, especially of the young and girls. Since this paper is based on the experiences of students from the Jammu and Kashmir region it is important to discuss the socio-economic as well as geographical profile of the Doda region as well.

The state of J&K has a diverse topography and unique challenges in development in terms of harsh weather

conditions, tribal population, geographical conditions, politics inadequate infrastructure, and imbalanced regional growth. Although targeted efforts have been made to achieve SDGs, much remains to be done. These blockages in development impact various aspects of life, including economic activities, access to education and healthcare, and the overall social well-being of the residents (Dayrit *et al.*, 2018) [4].

Doda is one of the largest districts in JK and is entirely a hilly and majorly a rural region. It has 01 Sub-district, 03 Sub-divisions, 17 Tehsils, and 31 Niabats. Doda is divided into 03 assembly constituencies' viz. Doda (52) Doda West (53) and Bhaderwah (54). There are 237 panchayats in the district. It consists of 409936 people of which 213641 are males and 196295 are females. Total literacy rate is 64.68% (<https://doda.nic.in>). Doda district has nearly 1133 government schools and 271 private schools. JK also follows SSA, policy of providing primary schools within a radius of one km launched in 2002-03 which relaxed identifying diverse habitations in a hilly terrain: relaxation was given to: habitations located on hill slopes, small habitation cut off by Nallah / Streams from the habitation having schooling facility, habitations separated by National Highway / Busy Road, habitations located in forest area. The policy additionally aimed at upgrading primary schools to the level of upper primary schools within a radius of 3 km having two feeding primary schools. This was especially done to provide complete education to the children of the nomadic migratory population in JK.

Apart from the Government initiatives some of the studies conducted on the status of various communities in the field of education have been able to identify the caste-wise disparities in the education sector as a study by Geelani& Kumar (2022) [7] finds the highest enrolment of scheduled caste males compared to females in secondary level in Doda. Their results corroborate earlier findings by Maya & Bhutia 2016. Geelani and Kumar also noted the dropout rate among students from scheduled castes has been rising over time, with female students experiencing a higher rate than male students. Likewise, some of the scholars have also raised issues of the education of tribals in various regions of JK. Yet, hardly the authors found any work discussing the issues and consequences of school proximity for children. Therefore, in this paper, an effort has been made to examine the relationship between these two variables.

**Methods of Data Collection**

A questionnaire that elicited information related to the students distance to school in terms of distance to school, mode of transportation, and accessibility to the road was used for this survey. The distance from home to school was measured using 3 levels; 0 – 4 km— close, 5 km - 10 km— far, and 11 above—Very Far. Other related questions were asked to the children to know the consequences of proximity on their performance at various levels. Doda district was selected as the universe of this study. The sample size for this study is 100 respondents including 50 girls and 50 boys. To select respondents, a stratified random sampling and purposive approach was employed, dividing the sample evenly between boys and girls, with 50 students from each gender. The higher secondary school was chosen due to its diverse student body, with attendees coming from all surrounding areas and focusing on Chilly, Dhrafra, Dugli, and Danda. This selection aimed to capture a broad range of

geographic locations and community contexts, ensuring that the findings would reflect varied experiences. Criteria for selection included enrollment size and the availability of educational resources, which contributed to the school's capacity to facilitate comprehensive educational experiences. By focusing on this institution, the study could effectively assess how distance to school impacts students' performance across different demographics.

**Malothi, Doda (J&K)**

Class				
11 <sup>th</sup>		12 <sup>th</sup>		
Male	Female	Male	Female	Total
25	25	25	25	100

This study was conducted in the Higher Secondary Schools in Malothi district, Doda (Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir). The school comprises four classes 9<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup>, and 12<sup>th</sup>. But the respondents were drawn from two classes 11<sup>th</sup>, and 12<sup>th</sup>. The selection of 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup>-grade students for the study was based on the fact that these students come from more remote areas, while those in the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grades are from nearby locations. The focus was to explore the unique challenges and experiences faced by students in the higher grades, particularly regarding their educational journey and access to resources.

**Results**

The data presented in Table 1 provides valuable insights that most students (74%) are far from their school. It indicates that a significant percentage of students live 11 km and beyond from school, which is considered a considerable distance. Additionally, 15% live between 5-10 km, and only 11% live close, within 4 km.

It is noteworthy to state here that School distance not only mars the zeal of students but also teachers. In 2018, a Government Middle school located in the hill village of Dhadhkai, five kilometers from Gandoh town, reported to have only two teachers despite having the highest enrolment (200 students) in the district.

**Table 1: Means of Transport**

No. of Students	Mode of Travel	Percentage
81	Walk	81%
11	Sometimes walk/sometimes by bus	11%
8	Have Bike/Scooty	8%

It was found that the majority of the students had to walk to school due to the unavailability and low frequency of public transport.

**Table 2: Distribution of Students and Time Taken to travel to School and return to Home**

School Distance	Time Taken		Frequency
	Going To School	Return To Home	
Very Far 11 km and Beyond)	2 hours	4 hours	74
Far (5-10 km)	1.5 hours	3 hours	15
Close (0-4 km)	30 minutes	40 minutes	11
Total			

It is seen in Table 3 that on an average students with far-off schools spend too much time commuting, more so without transportation and adults which is unsafe and hectic for them. The reason for more time taken to return home is because of the hilly area and the way is in Slope. A surface of which one end or side is at a higher level than another; a rising or falling surface. The students of Chilly and Dhrafra, Dugli, and Danda villages were concerned for study. The students who come from Chilly and Dhrafra spend more than 6 hours to go to school and return home. The students from Dugli spend about 3 hours and the students of the Danda village spend approximately 40 minutes. The condition of the pathway from home to school is poor. It is surrounded by paddy fields, and during this season, students are afraid of insects, snakes, and other wild animals. As a

result, they need to walk in groups. The route from Dugli to Chilly is covered by forest, making the area particularly unsafe for students, especially for girls. This indicates the variety of risks and vulnerabilities students have to go through to reach educational institutions.

**Impact of Performance**

The proximity of schools to student's homes carries a great influence on various aspects of their lives. For instance- academics, health, recreation, access to resources, relationships, social development, and a sense of belonging. Ensuring equitable access to nearby schools is crucial for enhancing students' educational experiences and well-being. The tables given below assess the multiple impacts of school proximity on children.

**Table 3: Impact of Long Distance on Students**

Distance	No. of Students	Consequences of Distance	Percentage
Very Far 11 km and Beyond)	74	Fatigue, mental stress, attendance issues, school dropout risk, and many others	81%
Far (5-10 km)	15	Fatigue, mental stress, attendance issues, school dropout risk, and many others	11%
Close (0-4 km)	11	Less Fatigue, low mental stress, more active as compared to others	8%
Total	100		100%

The inference drawn from the data (Table 4) is significant and highlights the challenges faced by students due to the long distance they need to travel to reach school. Traveling a long distance has a noteworthy impact on students' class participation. Some students miss classes in the first part of the day and leave school early just to go home safely. Walking a long distance is physically and mentally tiring, which leads to low performance in school. Tired students will become less motivated to participate in school activities, especially if there are challenges that hinder them from going to school, like long-distance walking, bad terrain, and bad weather.

**Table 4: Academic Performance of the Students by using the Department of Education Performance Rating Scale**

Level	Grade	Frequency	Percent
Outstanding	90-100	1	1%
Very satisfactory	80-90	3	3%
Satisfactory	70-80	6	6%
Fairly satisfactory	40-59	22	22%
Did not meet the expectations	Fail	68	68%
Total		100	100%

As reflected in Table 5, only (3%) of the respondents had a very satisfactory performance, and (1%) of them had an outstanding performance. However (6%) of them had only satisfactory performance, while (22%) of the respondents had fairly satisfactory performance. Most of the respondents (68) failed because most of them were living 11 km and beyond from school. The statement underscores an important correlation between the distance students need to travel to school and the potential negative impact on their academic performance.

Therefore, the data given above showed that most of the students are very far from school, so they have to walk to reach school. Students who need to walk to reach school spend most of their time walking rather than arriving at school early to prepare for the day's class. Further, these students arrive at school physically and mentally tired due to the long hours of travel, which can affect their performance. Besides, long-distance travel can contribute to the irregular attendance of students at school, affecting their learning.

The mention of students arriving at school with empty stomachs highlights a potential issue of inadequate nutrition. Proper nutrition is crucial for cognitive development and concentration. Students who do not have access to nutritious meals may find it difficult to focus on their studies, leading to a negative impact on academic performance.

**Table 5: Effect of Long Distance on Spending time on Study Per Week**

School Distance	Average Hours Spent	Frequency	Impact	Percentage
Very Far 11 km and Beyond)	Upto 2	74	Minimal engagement, significant drop in performance	74%
Far (5-10 km)	Upto 5	15	Reduced engagement and performance	15%
Close (0-4 km)	Upto 10	11	Higher engagement and performance	11%
Total		100		100%

Since, most of the time students are spending on commuting from home to school and school to home, which is physically as well as mentally draining it is seen in Table 7 that students from far places are not much involved in studying, and their academic engagement is minimal and

they also recorded poor performance in academic activities. Therefore, the lack of accessible roads exacerbates the challenge, making the commute more arduous for students in rural areas. The implication is that students may have limited time and energy for studying at home, affecting their

ability to reinforce what they've learned in class. The description of students arriving at school "sweat-soaked, pushed, and depleted" underscores the physical challenges they face during their commute. This physical exhaustion, coupled with mental fatigue, can make it harder for students to focus on their studies both at school and when they return home.

Based on the above discussion the key points to highlight Risk of Dropping Out (the students who walk long distances to school are identified as being at risk of dropping out. This suggests that the challenges associated with the commute may contribute to students discontinuing their education prematurely), Negative Effect on Academic Performance (The average negative effect on academic performance is attributed to the distance between the school and family residence. This implies that, on average, students who face long commutes may experience difficulties maintaining optimal academic performance).

**Gender Differentials**

It was drawn from the data that girls face additional challenges than boys which affect their school performance as well as presence. During the time of menstruation, their school presence gets lesser as they hardly go to school as their health does not allow them to cover long routes and walking. Some other health-related concerns are:

- Physical discomfort, cramps, headaches, and other physical symptoms can impact their daily activities.
- Hormonal fluctuations lead to mood swings, anxiety, or irritability, which may not be as commonly discussed.
- Girls struggle to access menstrual hygiene products, which can lead to missed school days or social stigma.
- Menstruation is surrounded by shame or secrecy, making it hard for girls to talk about their experiences or seek help.
- Many girls do not receive adequate education about menstruation, leading to confusion and anxiety about what to expect.
- Menstruation limits participation in school or activities due to a lack of facilities or resources.

Challenges	Solutions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fatigue and Concentration</li> <li>• Tardiness and Attendance</li> <li>• Nutritional Impact</li> <li>• School Drop Out</li> <li>• Gender Concerns</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Infrastructure Development</li> <li>• Transportation Support</li> <li>• Community engagement</li> <li>• Nutritional Support</li> <li>• Prioritise safety</li> </ul>

It was also noticed that in this region of Doda, most students hailed from poor families and their parents were not in a position to rent a room for their children. These families often struggled to pay for tuition, leading some students, particularly boys, to work to continue their education. Unfortunately, many students end up dropping out. Girls typically manage to complete 12th grade, but families often pressure them into marriage afterward. Girls in between classes 10<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> can marry, and those who finish 12th are also frequently encouraged to marry. Very few students enroll in college to pursue further education and many who do fail in their first semester. This often leads them to reconsider their options and shift to vocational courses such as nursing, ITI, or computer diploma programs.

**Conclusion and Discussion**

The challenges outlined in the context of the higher secondary school in Malothi, Doda district, shed light on the unique difficulties faced by students in rural areas with limited infrastructure and resources. School proximity influences the academic performance of the students especially when they are exposed to poverty and live in an environment with fewer opportunities and resources for learning. Students in difficult terrains oftentimes face these challenges while attending school. One of these difficulties is the long-distance walk to school since the roads leading there are impassable by motor vehicles. Students who are exposed to these challenges while attending school often encounter physical and mental fatigue, which affects their performance in school, especially in subjects that are difficult to learn, like math. In this context, the study examines the relationship between school proximity and students' academic performance. In conclusion, the research underscores the importance of recognizing and addressing the challenges associated with students' distance from school, particularly in rural areas (Doda) with geographical constraints. By understanding and prioritizing these challenges, stakeholders can work together to implement targeted interventions that ensure equitable access to education and improve students' academic performance (Mhiliwa, 2015) [10].

**Recommendations**

Key recommendations for reducing the negative impacts of school proximity on children and improving their overall learning experience can be summarized as follows:

- **Impact of Distance on Academic Performance:** The research concludes that there is a clear association between students' distance from school and their academic performance. The challenges associated with long-distance travel, including physical and mental exhaustion, contribute to poor academic performance.
- **Transportation and Road Accessibility:** While the study identifies the impact of distance, it notes that the mode of transportation and road accessibility were not specifically established as factors influencing academic performance. This suggests a potential avenue for further research to explore the specific effects of transportation and road conditions on students' academic outcomes.
- **Road Inaccessibility and Walking Challenges:** The majority of students living very far from school face challenges in accessing education due to road inaccessibility. The need to walk long distances becomes a significant barrier, leading to physical and mental exhaustion, ultimately affecting academic performance.
- **Government Efforts and Remaining Challenges:** The Indian government's efforts in establishing secondary schools in rural areas are acknowledged. However, the persistent challenge of long-distance travel, especially in areas with scattered settlements and mountainous terrain, remains a hurdle in achieving easily accessible education for all students.

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