

A Framework for the Study of Parental Preferences in School Choice: With Special Reference to Underprivileged Families in Urban India

Maya BUSER DE
Hankuk University of Foreign Studies

Abstract:

Nowadays, the increasing diversity of schooling options can make it difficult for parents to choose the right school for their children. Existing research on school choice has been concentrated in developed countries, where school choice policies are common. This kind of research has only recently expanded to India to understand why underprivileged families shift to low cost private schools from government education. In this paper we build a framework to understand school choice preferences among underprivileged parents in urban India beyond the debate on government versus private education. We review existing literature on school choice among low-income and minority parents in different countries and provide a flexible but comprehensive set of categories of school choice criteria. The purpose of this categorization into academic criteria; non-academic criteria; school demographic criteria, and family-related criteria, is both to allow broader comparative work, as well as to facilitate in-depth analysis of local contexts of education.

1. Introduction

Nowadays, the increasing diversity of schooling options can make it difficult for parents to choose the right school for their children. Marketization and privatization of education are spreading, and in many countries there are specific policies that allow parents freedom in choosing schools. These policies presuppose that parents rationally choose the best school for their children. Such policies aim to increase competition between schools to improve their quality and the same time close failing schools.

Existing research on school choice has been concentrated in developed countries, where school choice programs are common. There are several kinds of school choice policies, like voucher programs, as in Sweden (Andersson, Osth, and Malmberg 2010) and Chile (Hsieh and Urquiola 2006; Mizala and Romaguera 2000), where parents get vouchers to attend private schools; compulsory choice programs, like in the Netherlands, where families are not assigned to any school by default (Denessen, Driessen, and Slegers 2005); relaxed catchment programs, like in the UK, where parents can express their preference for schools other than

their assigned school (Ball and Vincent 2007; Burgess, Greaves, Vignoles, and Wilson 2011; Hastings, Van Weelden, and Weinstein 2007) and more complex programs, like in the US, where there are voucher programs, as well as charter schools and magnet schools, that are designed to attract different sets of parents (Bell 2009; Berends 2015; Goldring and Phillips 2008).

In urban India school choice is a reality not because of government policies, but because of the complexity of the educational market. There are huge differences in quality between education providers, such as recognized and unrecognized private schools, different kinds of government schools and within each of these sectors. Moreover, there are different languages of instructions, co-educational or single-sex schools, faith-based schools, and so on. However, research on school choice in India has mostly focused on understanding why underprivileged families shift to Low Fee Private (LFP) schools (Srivastava 2007) from government education.

As the number of choices increases so does the potential for inequalities in education. Therefore, it becomes important to understand processes of parental school choice and criteria employed for educational decision-making to design more inclusive and equal education policies.

In this paper we build a framework to understand school choice preferences among underprivileged parents in urban India, beyond the debate on government versus private education. We review existing literature on school choice with a focus on low-income and minority parents in different countries and provide a flexible but comprehensive set of categories of school choice criteria. The purpose of this categorization into academic criteria; non-academic criteria; school demographic criteria, and family-related criteria, is both to allow broader comparative work, as well as to facilitate in-depth analysis of local contexts of education.

2. School Choice among Underprivileged Families

2.1. The Limits of Rational Choice Theory for School Choice

Most school choice policies are based on rational choice theory (RCT), according to which parents make decisions based on calculations of the costs and benefits of education for their children. It is based on the assumption that all parents have access to complete information and that they are reliable to make the best decisions in the interest of their children (Bosetti 2004).

However, studies have shown that school choice is a complex process, influenced by factors like social class and social networks (Bosetti 2004), structural limitations and constraints, as well as household dynamics like gender roles in decision making (Ball 2002). Several authors highlight the irrational and emotional dimension of school choice (Ball 2002; Reay and Lucey 2004). Theories like bounded rationality by Herbert Simon (in Bell 2009) and North's mental models used by Srivastava (2007) are useful alternatives to rational choice theory to

understand the complexities of school choice.

2.2. School Choice Preferences among Underprivileged Parents

Some studies cited by Srivastava (2007) represent parents from poorer backgrounds as disinterested in education, at risk of being duped by unscrupulous private school owners, and unwilling to invest in education when facing monetary constraints. Conversely, in her study underprivileged parents engage in “active choice” of schools through the mental models of education they create. Opting for a local school can also be a choice for a variety of reasons, and not a sign of laziness or lack of interest in education (Bell 2009).

Nevertheless, underprivileged parents are “surrounded by real constraints ‘which cannot simply be turned into resources’” (Hoggett 2001, p. 45, cited in Reay and Lucey 2004) and make school choice more challenging. These constraints are related to income, geographic and social location (Reay and Lucey 2004), access to information about schools through social networks, and skills and resources to best interpret such information (Bell 2009; Hastings et al. 2007). Bell (2009) observes that parents from different backgrounds employ similar criteria to choose schools, for example academic criteria, but select from different sets of schools. Due to a stratified social context, lower-income families construct “choice sets” of lower quality than middle class parents. Therefore, even if they select the best school for their child in their set, it will not be as good as one selected by middle class parents.

Alternative explanations given for underprivileged parents’ choice patterns are that they place less expectation on education because they require less education to improve their class position, as opposed to middle class parents who face constant anxiety of falling down the social ladder if they do not pick a school that will allow their children to reach an adequate professional status (Ball 2002; Hastings et al. 2007; Reay and Lucey 2004). Further, attending schools with people from similar backgrounds is a way for working class parents to avoid difficult or humiliating situations for their children (Reay and Lucey 2004).

3. Review of Criteria for School Choice in Earlier Research

Each qualitative study of parental preferences in school choice employs a unique set of choice criteria, which might be derived from earlier research, or built inductively from the findings of the study. Bell (2009), provides broader categorizations of school choice criteria into holistic, academic, social, logistic, administrative, and others. Denessen et al. (2005) summarize school choice preferences into four categories: ideological; quality of education; non-educational characteristics; and geographical distance of the school. In Srivastava’s (2007) model of school choice parental decisions are based on a combination of macro-level attitudinal factors, like beliefs about education, and perceptions about public and private sector in schooling; and micro-level contextual factors, like information and beliefs about local schools, and constraints

faced by the household, most importantly economic ones.

Across studies, quality of education and academic results are the most common criteria for school choice. This is followed by location of the school, expressed either in terms of distance from home or work, or in terms of convenience.

Another common set of criteria is related to the composition of the school population, or the socio-economic background of students. Most parents prefer schools with families from similar socio-economic backgrounds (Ball 2002; Bell 2009; Bernal 2005; Denessen et al. 2005; Reay and Lucey 2004; Schneider and Buckley 2002). The presence of relatives, friends and people from one's own community is also important, especially among lower-income parents (Reay and Lucey 2004).

There are many other criteria for school choice in the literature, such as facilities (Bernal 2005; Denessen et al. 2005; James and Woodhead 2014; Srivastava 2007), class size (Bosetti 2004; Goldring and Phillips 2008), discipline (Goswami 2015; Rao 2010), safety (Bell 2009; Goswami 2015; Rao 2010), happiness and overall well-being of the child (Bell 2009; Srivastava 2007), reputation of the school, medium of instruction (Evans and Cleghorn 2014; James and Woodhead 2014), teaching styles and pedagogic methods, extra-curricular activities (Schneider and Buckley 2002), parental involvement with the school and with the child's education (Bosetti 2004; Goldring and Philipps 2008), and dissatisfaction with previous school (Goldring and Phillips 2008; James and Woodhead 2014).

4. Proposed Framework for The Study of Parental Preferences in School Choice

We group parental preferences for school choice in four broad categories: academic criteria; non-academic criteria; demography or school population related criteria; and family or household related criteria. These categories can accommodate most of the criteria used in earlier research and remain flexible enough to be adapted to different contexts.

Academic criteria include exams and test results, promotion rates, teachers' quality, their accountability to parents, dedication, styles of teaching. Further, criteria such as language of instruction, English or vernacular, and overall quality of the English language instruction are important in the Indian context (James and Woodhead 2014; Rao 2010; Srivastava 2007), and in other countries like South Africa (Evans and Cleghorn 2014).

Non-academic criteria include infrastructure of the school, distance from home, safety, discipline, provision of scholarships and other incentives, fee structure and hidden costs. Children's preferences for a school and their happiness (Srivastava 2007), and religious denomination of the school (Bernal 2005; Bosetti 2004; Denessen et al. 2005) can be included here.

In demographic or school population related criteria we include preferences related to the socio-economic background of students, such as social class, race, religious and ethnic

background, and caste in India. The presence of relatives, friends and neighbors in the same school, and the community dimension of local schools, are included too.

Finally, family or household related criteria are the socio-economic background of the family, expenditure on education, level of education of the parents, gender of the child. The latter is relevant in India, where educational decision-making has a gendered dimension (Goswami 2015; Rao 2010). In poor families the age of the child and the number of siblings may play a role in determining choice patterns (Page 2005).

5. Conclusion

Research on parental school choice is becoming increasingly important in India because of the marketization and privatization of education that makes it difficult for parents to choose the best school for their children among the diversity of options available.

We have proposed a systematic yet flexible categorization of parental school choice criteria, into academic; non-academic; demographic or school population related; and family related criteria. Thus we have provided a common base for studies in parental preferences on school choice adaptable to different contexts, and which may facilitate comparative studies.

Deepened understanding of the processes of school choice and the priorities of different social groups, especially the more disadvantaged ones, are required to design education policies that are more inclusive and promote equality.

6. References

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