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## School choice and student wellbeing

Colin P. Green<sup>a,\*</sup>, María Navarro-Paniagua<sup>a</sup>, Domingo P. Ximénez-de-Embún<sup>b</sup>,  
María-Jesús Mancebón<sup>b</sup><sup>a</sup> Lancaster University, United Kingdom<sup>b</sup> Universidad de Zaragoza, Spain

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## ABSTRACT

The debate over private versus public provision of schooling remains contentious. A large literature has developed focusing on the relative educational performance of different school types. Beyond these important outcomes, variations in schooling may have direct effects on students' contemporaneous welfare. For instance, private schools may generate better performance by requiring greater effort from students and exerting more pressure upon them. This paper uses data from three Spanish regions to examine how private schooling affects one domain of student wellbeing, satisfaction with education. While naïve estimates suggest a positive effect of private schooling on student satisfaction. These effects disappear, and even turn negative, after introducing controls for school quality and/or taking into account selection on unobservables. This suggests that while private schools may generate better educational outcomes, they do not necessarily maximize, and may even reduce, adolescents' contemporaneous welfare.

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## 1. Introduction

The debate over private versus public schooling continues to be highly contentious. As part of this a large literature has developed that aims to examine the effect of school type on student outcomes (see for instance Coleman, Hoffer, & Kilgore, 1982; Hoxby, 2003; Witte, 1992). One key point of comparison has been student test score performance. Comparisons of test score performance between public and private schools, including Catholic schools, typically reveal a large difference in favor of private providers. The chief empirical issue is identifying differences in educational treatment effects across school types separately from confounding factors such as school choice. Again, a substantial literature seeks to disentangle these channels through which private schools may 'outperform' public schools primarily with the aim of identifying the underlying treatment effect of private

schooling (see for instance Altonji et al., 2005a, 2005b; Evans & Schwab, 1995; Neal, 1997). While it remains an open and contentious question, the general view is that private schools cause higher educational performance.<sup>1</sup>

It is worth noting that there are a number of nuances to these findings. These results vary across types of private schooling, for instance Catholic, Charter etc.; student characteristics such as ethnicity and socio-economic background; specific domain of educational attainment (math, science or literacy); and other educational outcomes such as high school completion or college attendance. For instance, Figlio and Stone (1997) find that religious schools are modestly inferior in mathematics and science to state run schools, while nonreligious schools are

<sup>1</sup> It is worth noting that a recent special issue on charter schools in the Economics of Education Review highlights that the evidence on the aggregate effect of charter schools on student achievement is inconclusive. There exist studies of specific jurisdictions that find that charters outperform traditional public schools, while others find no difference between charters and 'traditional' schools, and there are some that even find lower performance in charter schools (Toma & Zimmer, 2012).

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +44 1524594667.

E-mail address: [c.p.green@lancaster.ac.uk](mailto:c.p.green@lancaster.ac.uk) (C.P. Green).

substantially superior. Altonji et al. (2005a) find that private Catholic schools substantially increase the probability of graduating from high school and college enrollment but do not improve test scores in reading and math. In the latter case, the observed higher Catholic school mathematics scores were entirely explained by modest positive selection on unobservables.

Any effect of private schooling on educational quality is clearly important. Educational attainment is a strong predictor of a range of life outcomes including wages (Angrist & Krueger, 1991; Card & Krueger, 1992; Card, 1999; Dearden, Ferri, & Meghir, 2002; Harmon & Walker, 1995, 2000; Kim, 2011), employment (Currie & Thomas, 2001), social mobility (Manski, 1992; Schneider, 2010) and wellbeing in later life (Oreopolous & Salvanes, 2011). As well as affecting these longer term outcomes, which clearly influence individual welfare, the type of school attended has the potential to influence student welfare in a direct and contemporaneous manner. Private schools may be under greater pressure to attract students by signaling superior educational performance. One way in which private schools may, in practice, improve test score performance is by requiring greater effort from, and exerting more pressure on, students. This may reduce student wellbeing even while it improves educational performance. Given that it has been demonstrated that adolescents' feelings of unhappiness and dissatisfaction are associated with a number of negative outcomes such as engaging in risky behavior (Levy-Garboua, Lohac, & Fayolle, 2006), it seems appropriate to examine how private schooling influences student wellbeing.<sup>2</sup> The contribution of this paper is to examine how school choice affects student wellbeing, focusing on one particular dimension, student satisfaction with education.

Specifically, we use student level data from three Spanish regions to attempt to identify the causal estimate of private schooling on student satisfaction among high school students. The particular form of private schooling we examine, discussed in more detail below, is in many ways close to Catholic schooling in other jurisdictions. These schools are previously independent Catholic schools that now receive public subsidies but are more expensive to attend and operate autonomously with respect to hiring, and to some extent, student selection. Our identification strategy is similar in spirit to Card (1995) and relies upon variations in the geographic availability of these schools. While naïve estimates reveal that private schooling is associated with higher levels of student wellbeing, we demonstrate that once school characteristics and unobserved heterogeneity are taken into account, students enrolled in public schools are more satisfied with their education. Moreover, in our most complete specification we find that private schooling is associated with lower satisfaction with the school. We subsequently demonstrate that these estimates are robust to the use of an

alternative instrumental variable and the potential violation of our exclusion restriction. Our results suggest that while private schools may generate superior educational outcomes, they do not necessarily maximize students' contemporaneous welfare.

This paper is related to a small literature on how schooling influences child and adolescent wellbeing. Gibbons and Silva (2011) analyses the determinants of children's wellbeing at school using data from the Longitudinal Survey of Young People in England (LSYPE). They investigate to what extent parents' and children's views of their school are linked to test-score based performance, and to what extent parents' judgments of school quality are linked to their child's happiness. They find that parents put more weight on schooling outcomes, such as test scores, relative to child satisfaction when they choose a school.<sup>3</sup>

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. The next section describes the data used and the institutional setting. In section 3, we briefly describe the empirical approach undertaken in this paper. Section 4 presents the results on school choice and other determinants on student's satisfaction, and the final section concludes.

## 2. Institutional background and data

### 2.1. School choice in Spain

One of the defining characteristics of the secondary schooling system in Spain is its dual nature consisting of predominantly public sector provision but with a substantial private sector. The largest segment of the latter is publicly subsidized private schools. These schools were formerly fully private and run by the Catholic Church. While these schools remain privately owned and run, they are now partially financed by regional education authorities and the central government.<sup>4</sup> The distribution of students enrolled in secondary education among different school types in Spain in 2002 was as follows: public school 67%, publicly subsidized private schools 26%, while there is a smaller completely independent sector 7% (Spanish Ministry of Education, 2004). In this paper, we focus on comparing the public sector with the publicly subsidized private schools.<sup>5</sup> As a result, for simplicity from herein we refer to these schools as private schools.

These private schools do not charge tuition per se but families pay a 'voluntary' contribution per student (on average 323 € p.a. in 2011/2012) which in practice represents a tuition fee (INE, 2013). In addition to this, there are a range of fees that apply to regular subjects conducted during school time. The expectation is that all students undertake these activities and these subjects are

<sup>3</sup> There is also a small literature on student satisfaction and higher education, see for instance Bandiera, Larcinese, and Rasul (2009).

<sup>4</sup> This occurs through the 1985 Right to Education Act (LODE). For a detailed description and historical evolution of the Spanish non-higher education system (see Bernal, 2005).

<sup>5</sup> The fully independent sector is also of clear interest; however our data has very poor coverage of this sector.

<sup>2</sup> Although it must be recognized that research exists showing that Catholic schooling reduces some forms of teen risky behavior such as sexual activity, arrests and hard drug use (Figlio & Ludwig, 2000).

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