



# Continuing to exercise choice after selecting a school: Insights into parent-decision making in local education markets in Nepal

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## ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes how parents continue to engage with schooling after their initial selection, using parent survey and focus group data collected in two urbanized districts in Nepal in 2011. I find substantial heterogeneity within and between public and private schools in parental participation. In particular, the parents who chose smaller private schools had stronger engagement with the school and their children, were more likely to voice their concerns, and consequently were more satisfied. In contrast, parents in below average public schools were more likely to express dissatisfaction but had limited interactions with schools to remedy their concerns.

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## 1. Introduction

Parents in developing countries face more choices than ever before due to the expansion and diversification of schooling options through private or voucher-funded schooling (Plank and Sykes, 2003; Srivastava and Walford, 2008; Srivastava, 2013). Parental background and involvement play a central role in shaping their children's achievement (Jeynes, 2007). Additionally, researchers have argued that schools will evolve and improve when schooling becomes a “coproduction” between parents and the school, when parents can actively choose from a variety of schooling options and participate in the school's functioning (Bifulco and Ladd, 2005; Schneider et al., 2000).

There is significant research attention on parental choice, but less attention paid to how parents continue to engage with schools after making their choice. The substantial body of research that focuses on how parents choose includes analyses of parental preferences, their utilization of information to make choices, and the socioeconomic constraints that limit their choices (see review in Chakrabarti and Roy, 2010). An understanding of how parents continue to engage with schooling after having chosen a school is equally important since the expected benefits from choice rests on

the notion that parents will engage more actively with the school after having made their selection. While there are studies in the U.S. context on the variations in parental involvement and engagement in different types of schools (Smith and Wohlstetter, 2009), there is an absence of such a literature on parental participation and satisfaction in developing country contexts. That is, there is a lack of focus on “how households interact with their chosen schools once the choice is made” (Srivastava, 2007, p. 11).

I address this dearth of literature by conducting a case study of parents' on-going decision-making and involvement after having chosen a school in the context of Nepal, a low-income country. I study the research question: How do parents continue to exercise choice after their initial school selection? Nepal is an interesting case for the parental choice analysis since the role of the private sector in education provision has grown from providing limited elite access to providing education to a growing group of middle and lower class consumers (Thapa, 2013). Moreover, to the best of my knowledge, a study on parent decision-making has not been conducted in Nepal, despite significant research attention on public–private differences and education governance initiatives (Bhatta, 2009; Carney and Bista, 2009; Thapa, 2011) in the country.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows. Section 2 situates the paper in the parent decision-making literature. Sections 3 and 4 briefly describe the national context and the data and methods for analysis respectively. In Section 5, I present the results by research questions – parental satisfaction, information gathering, voicing their suggestions and concerns, and their opinions on

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exiting. Section 6 concludes with a discussion on the variations in parent–school engagements, and provides some implications for future research and policymaking.

## 2. Parent decision-making literature and conceptual framework

Choice ideas have gained global acceptance over the past three decades. A key rationale for the optimism over choice initiatives is the expectation that school choice will expose schools to “powerful market-like forces built on decentralization, competition and consumer sovereignty” (Schneider et al., 2000, p. 40). If parents can choose schools, they can gain higher satisfaction if they can match children to schools of their preference. Increased parental choice is expected to motivate existing public schools to innovate and improve their quality to retain these empowered parents. Skepticism of choice primarily rests on concerns that choice will primarily end up disadvantaging the poor and underprivileged while upper and middle class parents, students and schools reap its rewards. As a result, choice has the potential to further stratify society rather than ameliorate existing inequalities (Fiske and Ladd, 2001; Hsieh and Urquiola, 2006).

In this study, I focus on the parent choice processes after having chosen a school, building a research design based on the works of Hirschman (1970), Schneider et al. (2000), and Srivastava (2007). Hirschman’s (1970) concepts of exit, voice and loyalty provide an instructive way for analyzing how the availability of alternatives can change how parents engage with the schools available in the local setting. Hirschman (1970) studied the decline of Nigerian state-run railways, and argued that there are two options that consumers are willing to utilize when responding to a decline in quality in public provision – exiting (causing decline in the use of public railways and forcing management to figure out ways to stop the exit) or voicing their concerns (forcing management to engage in a search for causes and cures to public dissatisfaction). When considering the example of schools, Hirschman contends that exiting is not the only way of making an “active choice”, but “loyalty” is also a choice mechanism that deters parents from exiting schools and instead ensures that they voice their concerns.

Schneider et al. (2000) conduct a quasi-experimental analysis of parental choice processes in New York and New Jersey. A key finding is that “active chooser” parents who trade-off schools and make a decision to select a school have higher social capital (PTA membership, volunteering, and trust of teachers), indicating higher on-going engagement with the schools. In Schneider et al.’s (2000) study they also find that parents whose children are in high performing schools and who pay greater attention to performance are less likely to be thinking about transferring their children. Given the evidence, the authors suggest that choice can raise levels of social capital and assist in the creation of effective and collaborative communities. Studies that have focused on parents who are active choosers (Buckley, 2007), and also found evidence of higher parental involvement and satisfaction (Bulkley and Fisler, 2003; Bifulco and Ladd, 2005; Finn et al., 2000). Other research has noted the substantial heterogeneity within charter schools in their ability to engage parents, attributed to differences in legislation, school climate, and parental and school backgrounds (Fuller, 2002; Wohlstetter and Smith, 2010).

Equity concerns, that is, the issue of who chooses and who loses in a choice environment, has long been of concern in most choice contexts (Carnoy, 1997; Fuller and Elmore, 1996). Low-income parents are often unable to fully benefit in choice environments due to their lack of access to more elite networks. Moreover, choice programs may also have design components that require parents to

cover supplemental schooling costs which make the selection of higher quality schools prohibitive for low-income parents. For instance, in the first two decades of the renowned Chilean voucher program, middle and upper class parents were much more likely to use vouchers which led to strong sorting by income and ability (Gauri, 1998; Hsieh and Urquiola, 2006). In the U.S. context, Schneider et al. (2000) argue that the fact that parents from different socioeconomic backgrounds will benefit differently in choice environments implies that policies need to be creative about how to give lower SES parents access not just to information but also to valuable networks.

Srivastava (2007) models household choice as a holistic process structured by macro-level attitudinal factors, such as beliefs about education and public–private differences, and micro-level contextual factors, such as local contextual characteristics and individual constraints. Of particular relevance to this study is the author’s application of Hirschman’s concepts of voice, loyalty and exit to the Indian low-fee private school context. Srivastava (2007) finds that households who choose low-fee private schools do not demonstrate loyalty nor do they engage with schools politically by voicing their concerns. Instead, they primarily focus on economic strategies. Their strategies of engagement ranged between staying (for fear of turbulence), frequently bargaining on fees (to reduce their financial commitments), exiting the school, and being a chronic exiter (fee-jumping from school to school). Srivastava (2007) argues that the disadvantaged groups that finally got access to school choice through low-fee private schooling actively engaged in economic strategies because there were many suppliers and there were few costs of entry and exit. The author concludes by suggesting that similar to Hirschman’s Nigerian public railway context, the public education system in India has limited incentives to improve. Consequently, the strong adoption of the low-fee private sector by the most motivated among the poor may further inequities among the disadvantaged groups.

### 2.1. Conceptual framework

In this study, I address the question: How do parents continue to exercise choice after their initial school selection? As depicted in the overall conceptual framework on parental choice, Fig. 1, I frame parental choice behavior as a series of interlinked processes which includes their selection of a school (not discussed in this paper) and their actions after school selection, the focus of this paper. I expect that school choice will also be affected by macro-attitudinal factors (Srivastava, 2007) such as societal perceptions of public or private

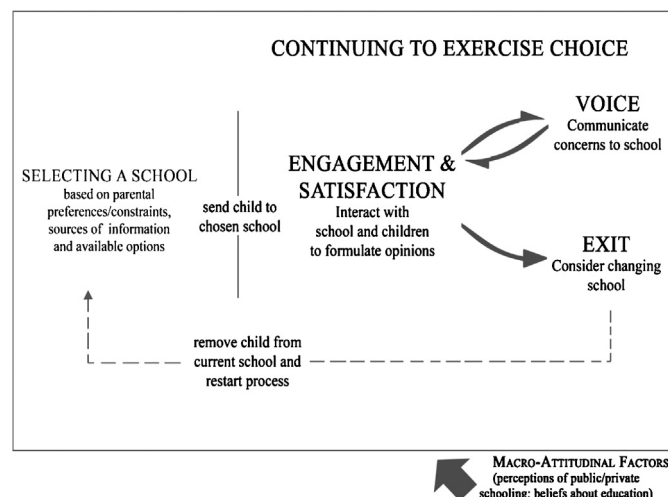


Fig. 1. Parent decision-making framework: a focus on how parents continue to exercise choice after school selection. Research framework based on Elacqua et al. (2006), Hirschman (1970), Schneider et al. (2000), and Srivastava (2007).

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