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School choice in the Basque Country: Public, government-dependent and private schools with different languages of instruction

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the determinants of parental decisions when choosing schools for their children in the Basque Country, Spain. This choice is studied both in terms of private versus public schooling and also the main language of instruction, using data from PISA 2012 questionnaires. We estimate the probability of a family choosing a certain type of school using a multinomial logit. The main results indicate that the most significant influence on the decision of school type and language model (Basque, Spanish, or Mixed) comes from the amount of wealth in the family, as well as the language spoken at home. Moreover, the option of having Basque as the sole language of instruction mitigates the effect on class stratification.

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1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to analyze the determining factors behind parental decisions when choosing schools for their children in the autonomous region of the Basque Country, Spain. The Basque Country is an autonomous region of northern Spain and it includes the Basque provinces of Álava, Biscay and Gipuzkoa, also called the Historical Territories. The Basque Country was granted the status of nationality within Spain, by the Spanish Constitution of 1978. The school choice is studied, both in terms of private versus public schooling and also the main language of instruction, which can be either Basque, Spanish, or a mix of both. Data was used from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2012 (OECD, 2012a,b) questionnaires on students and schools.

In the Basque country, two official languages coexist: Basque, which is a distinctive and very ancient (pre-Indo-European) language with roots different from any other language in the world, and Spanish. Of course, having multiple official languages in a single country or area is not unique, especially in Europe: Belgium, Finland, Luxembourg, Netherlands, and Switzerland are all examples of this and some have more than two official languages. However, the situation in the Basque Country is quite rare, because, due to the completely different roots of the languages, knowing one language does not help

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when attempting to learn the other. More importantly, Basque is only spoken in the Basque Country whereas, for instance, speaking two or three out of the four official languages in Switzerland is also of use outside of this country.

Furthermore, there is a sense of pride and cultural identity in the Basque Country that can be a driving force behind the choice of school. This cultural identity, which partly stems from the language, has already been shown in a different framework (Hoyos, Mariel, & Fernández-Macho, 2009), to impact on the willingness to pay to protect natural resources in the area. This sense of self-identity plays a central role in Basque society, which is considered as matriarchal; as a pointed example, a female goddess represents 'Mother Earth' or *amalurra*.

The linguistic polarization between Basque and Spanish has also been studied in the context of its relationship to the Basque terrorist conflict (Gardeazabal, 2011). As another example of how deeply ingrained the language issue is in Basque society, the term *Euskaldun* (literally, *Euskera duenak*; i.e., 'that who knows Basque') is also used to refer to the Basque people, suggesting that a Basque person is solely someone who actually knows how to speak the language.

Hence, although the analysis of school choice is not new, the Basque Country does offer a unique insight into this decision, due to the additional consideration of the language, in addition to the age-old debate of public versus private. In the United States, the empirical literature on the subject considers the different choices parents have besides these traditional two: home-schooling, voucher programs, or charter schools, e.g., Beales and Wahl (1995), Heise, Colburn and Lamberti (1995), Martinez, Godwin and Kemerer (1995), Greene, Howell and Peterson (1998), Teske and Schneider (2000), Belfield (2004), Bifulco and Ladd (2006), and Goldring and Phillips (2008). The majority of the evidence in these studies points towards the fact that parents who choose a certain school have different characteristics from parents who do not actually choose a school.

More precisely, Belfield (2004) finds that home-schooled children come from families with similar characteristics to those who are not home-schooled, but the employment status of the mother (specifically, not being employed outside of the home) is critical in the decision-making process. Regarding voucher programs, Greene et al. (1998) find that parents report academic quality and safety as the main reasons for participating in the voucher program; whereas Beales and Wahl (1995) in Milwaukee, Heise et al. (1995) in Indianapolis, and Martinez et al. (1995) in San Antonio all find that educational quality is the most important reason. In a review of the United States literature on the subject, Teske and Schneider (2000) suggest that expanded choice systems can aggravate stratification or segregation due to the fact that different types of parents make systematically different choices. This is corroborated by the findings of Bifulco and Ladd (2006) regarding racial segregation in the charter school program in North Carolina.

The story of school choice in Europe is rather different from the United States, however. Where the family lives mostly determines where the children go to school; nonetheless, parents do not necessarily have to move away from areas in which they have chosen to live in order to benefit from high quality state schooling (Butler & Van Zanten, 2007). Furthermore, the school choice options in Europe are basically divided into either public or private schools; other popular United States choices, such as charter schools, are unavailable. Hence, the empirical literature on European school choice centers on the private versus public debate, its effect on segregation, and on examining the characteristics of those parents who reject the school that corresponds to their children according to where they live, in favor of another (private) one.

As an example of the latter, Echols and Willms (1995) study the differences between Scottish families who accept the school assigned to them and those who reject it. Unsurprisingly, they find the socio-economic status of the family to be positively correlated with the decision not to send the child to the assigned school, and the number of alternatives considered in the decision-making process, as well as the importance attributed to obtaining information about the school through direct contact with teachers and principals.

Denessen, Driessena and Slegers (2005) also focus on explaining the reasons behind parents' acceptance or rejection of school assignment in the Dutch system. In this case, they carry out the study by considering both family and school characteristics. Although they find that immigrant and native Dutch parents have different reasons for choosing schools, leading to a possible self-segregation along these lines, they do not obtain the same finding for the families' socio-economic status, in contrast with studies of other European countries.

In France, public opinion tends to view the two (public-private) sectors as more complementary than in opposition. Langouet and Léger (2000) find that families increasingly use private schools as a 'second chance', i.e., as an alternative to public schools when students are failing. In the Finnish context, where the risk of making a bad choice is relatively small, given that the Finnish educational system is regarded as one of the best in the world, Kosunen (2014), through a series of semi-structured interviews with parents, finds that the reputation of schools and classes shape the school choice, potentially favoring those that have a higher socio-economic status. In the case of Sweden, the ability to choose between public and private has mostly benefited privileged groups, resulting in children of privileged parents being concentrated in the 'best' schools resulting, in turn, in socio-economic segregation (Lindbom, 2010).

More examples of school choice literature include the works of Bosetti (2004) in Alberta, Canada, and Müller, Tscharaktschiew and Haase (2008) in Germany, the latter introducing the space component, using location and geocoded data. However, the vast majority of these analyses still concern 'ownership' or funding of the school, with no additional parameter of consideration, as we are doing in the Basque Country, with its co-official languages. Checchi and Jappelli (2004) analyze the relationship between school choice and its quality in Italy. They use data on children's attendance of public and private schools and parents' self-assessment of the quality of public schools in the city of residence. Their results indicate that the quality of schools is one of the driving factors behind the choice between private and public schools.

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