

FACTORS INFLUENCING PARENTS' DECISION TO SELECT PRIMARY SCHOOL IN COLOMBO DISTRICT, SRI LANKA

ABSTRACT

Aims: This study aims to examine the factors influencing parents' decision in selecting primary school in Colombo district in Sri Lanka. Accordingly, the study particularly examines the household characteristics and school characteristics influencing parents' decision to select a primary school in Colombo district.

Methodology: This is a quantitative study which employed a sample of 146 parents in Colombo district. A half of the respondents have been chosen from public schools whilst the other half from private schools in Colombo district. A self-administered survey questionnaire was distributed to collect data and logistic regression method was used for data analysis.

Results: According to the estimated marginal effects (probabilities) of the final logit model, school that parent attended and perceived academic performance had a positive effect on parents' selection of a public school. In contrast, family income and discipline of the school had a negative effect on parents' selection of public a school.

Conclusion: Parent being the past pupil of the school, perceived academic performance and discipline of the school were the significant school characteristics influencing the parents' decision to select a primary school while family income was a significant household factor.

Keywords: Parents' Decision, Primary School Selection, Household Characteristics, School Characteristics.

1 INTRODUCTION

Education, which is also known as the backbone of the society is of utmost important towards achieving a sustainable development and strengthening social, cultural, historical and integral development in any country [1]. While being grateful to the free education policy in Sri Lanka which was introduced in 1942 [2], it's noteworthy to mention that compulsory education is provided to all children who belong to the age category of 5-14 years and consequently it makes the primary and secondary education accessible to even the most impoverished children [3].

However, for several decades, Sri Lankan education system has been increasingly exposing to the fierce competition. Adding more, according to a survey conducted by the Transparency International Sri Lanka in 2009 [4], it has been revealed that many parents made preparation for school admission long before the due time, sometimes as soon as the child was born. Particularly, selecting a suitable primary school for the child is a crucial

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decision made by the parents on behalf of the future of the child and it is obvious that such a decision may possess the repercussions for the entire life time of the child's life.

The competition among the parents to admit their child to a school is impacted by the factors influencing parents' decision to select school. In a country like Sri Lanka where the current school system is not adequately and equally developed, such a competition among parents to select a school for their children would lead to several issues like having an ineffective teacher-student ratio in a class room, asymmetric distribution of resources within the school system and bribery and corruptions in the school admission [5, 4]. Moreover, the Western Province in Sri Lanka possesses the highest student-teacher ratio while, Colombo district claims the 2nd highest student-teacher ratio among the other districts in Sri Lanka [6].

Hence the objective of this study was to examine the factors influencing parents' decision to select primary school in Colombo district, Sri Lanka. The scope of the study was limited to the household characteristics and school characteristics influencing the parents' decision to select primary school in Colombo district.

1.1 Literature Review

1.1.1 An Overview of the Sri Lankan Education System

The system of free education in Sri Lanka has made the education freely available to a large extent, up to the tertiary level [7].

The general education in Sri Lanka which is referring to the school level education and is of 13 years duration while the higher education system in Sri Lanka which is mainly referring to the University education in which the duration depends on the type of program that students follow. The general education system is again divided into three levels: primary (up to grade 5), secondary (from grades 6 to 11) and the collegiate levels (grades 12 and 13) [8]. Schools play a part and parcel role in Sri Lankan education system. Schools can be considered as an important investment in securing a chance of successful entry into the world of work [9].

Most of the schools operated in the Sri Lankan context are in the form of government schools, private fee levying schools, private non-fee levying schools, approved/certified schools and private schools [10]. The government schools operated in Sri Lanka are administrated either by national level or provincial level. Based on the functional grades, the public schools in Sri Lanka can be categorized into four: 1AB schools, 1C schools, Type 2 schools, and Type 3 schools [6].

1.1.2 Rational Choice Theory

According to Rafael Wittek [11], rational behavior is the suitable behavior in pursuit of specific goals under the constraints. It consists of individual preferences, beliefs, and constraints. The rational choice theory has three underlying assumptions. (1) individuals have selfish preferences, (2) they maximize their own utility, and (3) they act independently based on full information [11].

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In line with this theory, Bosetti [12] stated that parents are utility maximizers who make decisions from clear value preferences based on calculations of the costs, benefits, and probabilities of success of various options. Consequently, they will be able to demand actions effectively from local schools and teachers based on which they could be relied upon to pursue the best interests of their children. Similarly, as per Coleman [13] in school selection policy rested on rational choice theory, parents would engage in an orderly, sequential process, —gathering information about the quality of services that schools offer and then make a —rational decision based on such objective data. Adding more, parents would also rely on their personal values, subjective desired goals of education and others within their social and professional networks in order to make the decision school selection [14].

1.1.3 Household Characteristics Influencing Parents' Decision to Select a School

Family characteristics play a significant role in school selection among the Sri Lankans [8]. Considering the religion of the parents, as per the studies carried out by Goldring and Phillips [15], it was revealed that Catholic parents are more likely to select private schools due to their religious values. Those findings were also consistent with the Gallup Survey [16] where the Catholic parents admitted that the main reason which induced them to select private schools for their children was attributed to religious influence, values and attitude with the view to molding them for future. In terms of the parent's education, Goldring and Phillips [15] emphasized that there is a positive relationship between parents' education and the likelihood of selecting a private school. Parent's occupation is also influencing school selection where it revealed that working parents are more likely **select** private schools than other **kind** of parents [17].

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Moreover, the level of income of the parents is a crucial factor to select a school for their child due to the monetary involvement [18]. Moreover, as per Goldring and Phillips [15] the higher family income increases one's chances of affording private education. Also, it is not something abnormal to select the same school for their children by the parents as they attended at their age of schooling. Based on the understanding of the parent's former school, believing that the former school possesses a conducive learning environment for the child, the parents select the former school where they attended for their child [19]. As per the list of factors most frequently cited by parents as significant when selecting a school for their child as specified by Bastow [20] siblings at the same school was an important factor. Thus, parents are more likely to select the same school for their child where the siblings are already there [21]. Also, parents usually tend to select a school based on the place where they live [15].

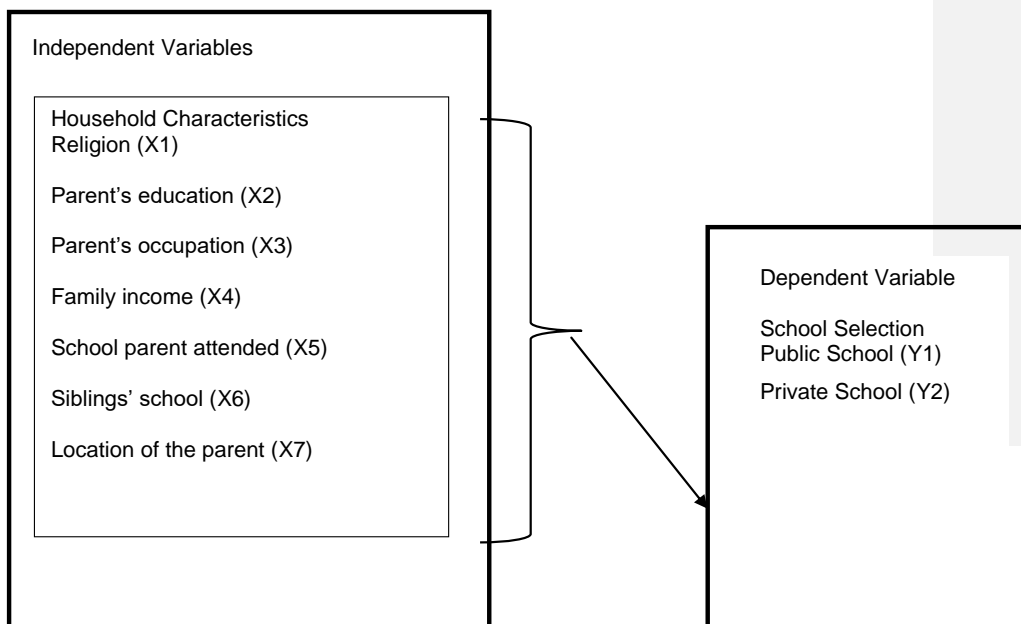
1.1.4 School Characteristics Influencing Parents' Decision to Select a School

As one of the school characteristics, based on the perceived academic performance, parents are more likely to select private schools [22]. Considering the perceived quality of the teachers as per Dixon, Humble & Tooley [23], it was revealed that parents who are more concerned about the quality of teachers are more likely to select a private school for their child. Similarly, considering the school facilities, when selecting a school by the parents, efficient use of facilities of the school was one of their important considerations [24]. Once

Davis [25] mentioned that the private schools possess school facilities, thus justifying the high price of their tuition, which in turn persuades the parents to select such schools for their children. According to Kelly and Scafidi [26], the availability of the extra-curricular activities was an important consideration of the parents to select a school for their child. In line with this, Figlio and Stone [27] have found that parents select private schools because of their desire to give better chances for their children to participate in extracurricular activities. Apart from that, it has been revealed that parents tend to select private schools over public schools due to better discipline maintained by private schools [28].

1.1.5 Conceptual Framework

Based on the literature, the conceptual framework used in this study can be depicted in below figure 1. The dependent variable; School Selection was a dichotomous variable which consisted of public-school selection and private school selection. Two categories of independent variables; household characteristics which include 7 variables and school characteristics which include 5 variables were used in this study.



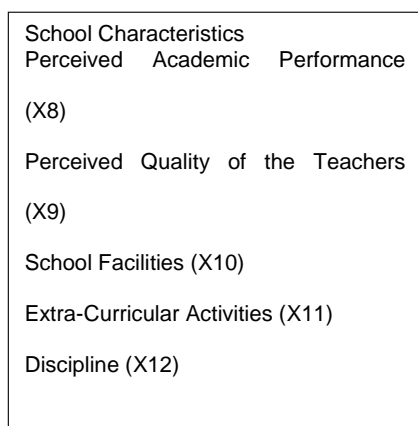


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

As per Dixon et.al [23], there is a shortage of research around selection and schooling in developing contexts while for Sri Lanka there is no exception. Thus, this study filled out a gap in the literature by examining the factors influencing the parents' decision to select a primary school in Sri Lankan context, by using the data from public and private schools in Colombo district. Most importantly, this study was the first of its kind in Sri Lanka, declaring the originality of the study based on data collected from the local arena. Thus, this work was a great endeavor towards filling out that gap identified in the literature.

2 METHODOLOGY

The study population of this study was the parents who have selected a public or a private school located in the Colombo district for their children belonging to the age category of age 5 to age 10. The sample size of this study was 146 respondents out of which 50% of the respondents had selected a public school located in Colombo district for child while the rest of the 50% had selected a private school located in the same district. The unit of analysis in

this study was the individual parent who had selected a public or a private school with a primary section in Colombo district for his/her child. Convenient sampling technique was used in this study since the researcher had less access to the selected study population.

2.1 Data Collection and Data Collection Instrument

Primary data was collected preliminarily via the survey questionnaires. The questionnaire used in this study was basically based on the conceptual frame work and some of the adapted questionnaires in the published dissertations submitted for the Master of Education Doctor of Philosophy and Survey reports. The questionnaire consisted of two main sections namely; Section A and B which were designed to accomplish the research objective of the study. i.e. to examine the household characteristics and school characteristics influencing the parents' decision to select primary school in Colombo district while. Section A consisted of the questions related to the enquiry of social demographic profile of the respondent, basic information of the child and other details and the Section C consisted of 15 Likert scale questions representing five major school characteristics influencing the parents' decision on school selection which were derived based on the concept framework used in this study. The respondents were expected to express their level of agreement from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree' with each of the statement mentioned under the main five school characteristics used in this study.

2.2 Validity and Reliability

To maximize the content related validity a pilot test [29] was carried out by the researcher based on which the modifications to the research instrument were made during this pilot stage, as needed. Also, the survey questionnaire used in this study was based on the scholars' questionnaires of which validity was ensured [14, 30].

Cronbach's Alpha, a measure of internal consistency was used to measure the reliability of the research instrument. Cronbach's Alpha value of overall model construct of this study was 0.925 while the Cronbach's Alpha values of the Perceived Academic Performance, Perceived Quality of the Teachers, School Facilities, Extra-curricular Activities and Discipline were 0.701, 0.851, 0.864, 0.884 and 0.790 respectively. Thus, it was apparent that all the items in the survey were internally consistent and had a good level of reliability.

2.3 Method of Data Analysis

At the inception of the data analysis, sample profile was analyzed and then data analysis was further elaborated by descriptive statistics and logistic regression. Logistic regression is appropriate to explain the relationship between the binary dependent variable and one or more nominal, ordinal, interval or ratio-level independent variables. In this study, the logit model was developed with a dummy variable where public school was denoted as 1 and private school was denoted as 0.

The formular for logit model was;

$$\ln\left(\frac{P}{1-P}\right) = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + \dots + \beta_k X_k$$

Where: β_0 = the constant of the equation and β = the coefficient of the predictor variables.

In this study the basic formula for estimating the probability towards public school was:

$$\ln \left\{ \frac{p(\text{SCHOOL_SELECTION}=1)}{1-p(\text{SCHOOL_SELECTION}=1)} \right\} = \beta_0 + \beta_1(\text{RELIGION}) + \beta_2(\text{EDUCATION}) + \beta_3(\text{OCCUPATION}) + \beta_4(\text{INCOME}) + \beta_5(\text{PARENT_SCHOOL}) + \beta_6(\text{SIBLING_SCHOOL}) + \beta_7(\text{LOCATION}) + \beta_8(\text{AP}) + \beta_9(\text{QT}) + \beta_{10}(\text{SF}) + \beta_{11}(\text{EC}) + \beta_{12}(\text{DS})$$

3 Results and Discussion

3.1 Sample Profile

Considering the composition of the sample, the sample size of this study was 146 out of which 73 responses which means that 50% of the sample was represented by the parents who had selected a public school while the rest of the 50% of the sample was represented by the responses collected from the parents who had selected a private school for their children.

Considering the demographic profile of the sample, the majority of the sample was Sinhala-Buddhists (89%) while the majority of the sample (54.8%) had attained higher education. In terms of the parent's occupation, the majority of the sample was employed in the private sector (40.4%), while 31.5% of the sample was employed in the public sector, and only 19.2% of the sample was unemployed. Considering the family income of the sample, the mean monthly family income was recorded at LKR 172,277 while the majority of the sample was (57%), earning less than LKR 100,000 as average monthly family income. On the other hand, only 5% of the sample was earning at LKR more than Rs 500,000 as average monthly family income. Considering the school parent attended, only 18.5% of the sample was a past pupil of the child's school. Similarly, only 43.8% of the sample consisted of the parents of whom other children (siblings of the child) attending the same school.

Taking into account the figures related to the location of the parent, the majority of the sample (56.2%) had located 5km or less than 5km in distance from home to school where the child attends. At the same time, the mean distance from home to school where the child attends of the sample was recorded at 7.05km.

3.2 Logistic Regression

3.2.1 Household and School Characteristics Influencing Parents' Decision to Select a Primary School in Colombo District

Table 1 below summarizes the results of the hypotheses testing (at 95% confidence level). It includes the possible explanatory variables belonging to the household characteristics and school characteristics which were expected to have an effect on the selection of the primary school in Colombo district.

Table 1: Results of the Hypotheses Testing

Variable	Alternative Hypotheses	Level of Significance	Status of the Alternative Hypotheses
Household Characteristics			
Religion	Non-Buddhist parents are more likely to select a private school over a public school.	.17	Not supported.
Parent's Education	Parents with higher level of education are more likely to select a private school over a public school	.39	Not supported.
Parent's Occupation	Employed parents are more likely to select a private school over a public school.	.66	Not supported.
Family Income	Parents with higher family income are likely to select a private school over a public school.	.01	Supported
School Parent Attended	Parents being a past pupil of the child's school are more likely to select the same school.	.00	Supported
Siblings' School	Parents with other children attending the school are more likely to select the same school for the child.	.16	Not supported.

Location of the Parent	Parents residing at a nearer location are more likely to select the same school for the child.	.93	Not supported.
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School Characteristics

Perceived Academic Performance	Parents who are more concerned about the academic performance are more likely to select a private school over a public school.	.01	Supported
Perceived Quality of the Teachers	Parents who are more concerned about the quality of the teachers are more likely to select a private school over a public school.	.73	Not supported.
School Facilities	Parents who are more concerned about the school facilities are more likely to select a private school over a public school.	.61	Not supported.
Extra-curricular Activities	Parents who are more concerned about the extra-curricular activities are more likely to select a private school over a public school.	.98	Not supported.

Discipline	Parents who are more concerned about the discipline are more likely to select a private school over a public school.	.02	Supported
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The initial logit model was estimated using all the independent variables as included in the conceptual framework. For the variable selection for the final logit model, forward stepwise technique was adopted with P -value <0.10 and previously selected variables for removal with P -value ≥ 0.15 . As per the Table 1 above mentioned, the insignificant variables such as Religion, Parent's education, Parent's occupation, Sibling's school, Location of the parent, Perceived quality of the teachers, School facilities and Extra-curricular activities were excluded when arriving at the final logit model.

The estimated results of the final logit model at 5% level of significance are presented in Table 2. The area under the Receiver Operating Characteristic curve (ROC) was found to be 0.8355 (refer to the Figure 2 below), which can thus infer that the estimated final logit model fitted aptly to explain the relationship between different household and school characteristics and the school selection. Hence, it can be concluded that the estimated logit model was appropriate to describe the connection between the school selection and household and school characteristics.

Table 2: Logit Model Estimation Results

Variable	Estimate	Std.Error	Marginal Effect
Constant	3.493859	1.67993	
Household Characteristics			
School parent attended	2.57606	1.08161	0.3629273
Family income	-0.0085766	0.002475	-0.001875
School Characteristics			

Perceived academic performance	1.080596	0.4034862	0.2362323
Discipline	-1.49956	0.5058408	-0.3278231
Area under ROC curve	0.8355		
Pseudo R2	0.2512		
Log likelihood	-58.732259		
No. of observation	118		

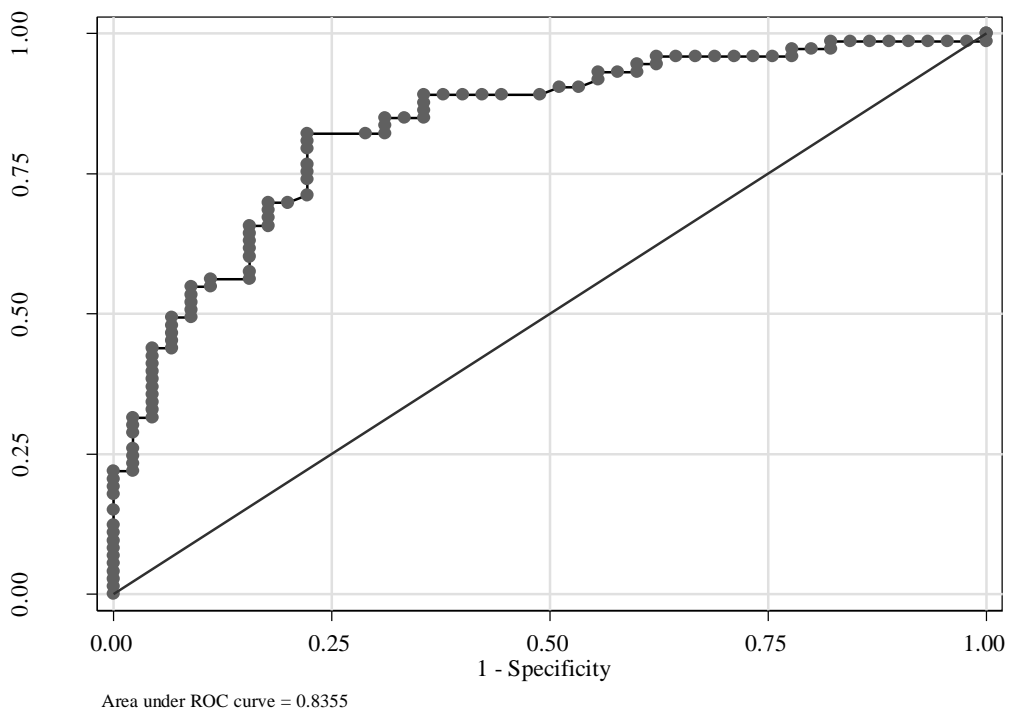


Figure 2:ROC Curve

According to estimates of coefficients given in the Table 2, in the estimated logit model, School parent attended is the most significant variable ($p=0.000$) and it is followed by Family Income ($p=0.001$), Discipline ($p=0.002$) and Perceived Academic Performance ($p=0.006$)

respectively. Similarly, School parent attended as a household characteristic and perceived academic performance as a school characteristic have a positive effect on the selection of public school. In contrast, family income as a household characteristic and discipline as a school characteristic have a negative effect on selection of public school. In other words, family income and discipline have a positive effect on the selection of private school.

Considering the estimated marginal effects (probabilities) of the household characteristics included in the final logit model, the probability of selecting the same school where the parent attended for own child is higher by 36% compared to the other schools. Elaborating more, if the parent is a past pupil of a public school, the probability of selecting the same public school for the child is higher by 36% compared to the other schools. Thus, it is apparent that, this finding is inline with the existing literature [31, 19].

Also, as per the estimates of coefficients show in Table 2, the probability of selecting a public school over a private school is 0.19% lower for parents with higher income. In other words, the probability of selecting a private school is 0.19% higher for the parents with higher income. Thus, this research finding is also in line with the literature [15, 23].

Elaborating the estimated marginal effects (probabilities) of the school characteristics included in the final logit model, the probability of selecting a public school over a private school is 24% higher for parents who are more concerned about the academic performance. However, as per the literature, parents are more likely to select private schools over a public school due to the high academic performance of the private schools [22, 15]. Thus, this finding is contradictory with most of the literature. Almost all the literature available to the researcher is based on the foreign context and it may be the reason to produce contradictory results in terms of the academic performance and school selection. However, still in the Sri Lankan context, it is widely perceived that public schools are dominant than the private school in terms of the academic performance which is further evident from the fact that there is an intense competition among the parents to admit their child to a leading public school in the country. Unlike the foreign countries, in Sri Lanka, due to the lack of regulatory mechanism that ensures the standards of private schools, the academic quality of those schools is highly debatable [32].

Considering the estimated marginal effects (probabilities) of the last school characteristics included in the final logit model, the probability of selecting a public school over a private school is 33% lower for parents who are more concerned about the discipline. In other words, the probability of selecting a private school is 33% higher for the parents who are more concerned about the discipline. Thus, it can be concluded that, this finding is in line with the existing literature [16, 28].

4. CONCLUSION

The objective of this study was to examine household and school characteristics influencing the parents' decision to select a primary school in Colombo district, Sri Lanka. Based on the results of the data analysis, the estimated logit model to examine household characteristics and school characteristics influencing the parents' decision to select a primary school was statistically significant and it proved that as family characteristics "School Parent Attended"

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and "Family Income" and as school characteristics "Perceived Academic Performance" and "Discipline" were the factors influencing the parents' decision to select a primary school in Colombo district.

As per the research findings, since the school parent attended, was a key factor associated with the school selection, having a strong alumni network in the school may be a good opportunity to enhance the reputation of the school, especially for the benefit of private schools. Also, the findings suggested that the parents with higher income was an important target market of private schools for which attractive marketing strategies can be formulated. However, since private schools are not affordable to all parents, presence of private schools catering to the requirements of the profitable customers may lead to foster social stratification. Similarly, due to the negative perception of the parents towards the academic performance of private schools, it shed light for the respective public institutions to develop a regulatory mechanism to ensure the academic standards of private schools [32]. Finally, since it had been revealed that the parents bear a negative perception on the discipline of public schools, it's necessary for the public schools to adapt the required strategies in order to reflect good discipline.

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