

FACTORS INFLUENCING PARENTS' DECISION TO CHOOSE PRE-SCHOOLS FOR THEIR CHILDREN: A CASE OF DODOMA CITY

Michael B Msendekwa¹ and Asha H Lubuva²

Abstract

Quality education provision is the main factor which attracts parents to send their children to preferred schools. This study investigated the reasons for parents' choice of specific pre-primary schools in Dodoma City. It investigated criteria parents use in choosing pre-primary and ways parents use to get information about particular schools for their children. The Rational Choice Theory (RCT) was employed to guide the study. The study employed both qualitative and quantitative approaches. A total of 55 respondents composed of parents were involved in the study. Respondents were selected through simple random sampling technique. Data were collected through interviews, focus group discussion and documentary review and questionnaire. The findings revealed that, in theory, Rational Choice Theory sounds good as it governs the beliefs that most parents make decisions based on preferences that are constricted by real world circumstances. The theory is very difficult to put into practice due to the challenges that parents face when choosing pre-primary for their children like home school distance, costs, availability of meals at school, language of instruction and other factors as revealed by the study. The study recommends the government to continue insisting about provision of quality education in all schools, regulate school fees in private schools as well as considering to put into practice the policy stated about the required number of students in classroom.

Key words: Parents' Decision, Pre-Schools, Children, Dodoma City

1. INTRODUCTION

The decision of a parent to send a child to a specific pre-primary school is one of the most critical situations a parent makes to support child development and learning. When it comes to decisions choosing school for children, parents become the best choosers of their children's education. The practice of choosing school for children is one of the important ways parents use to be involved in children's education. A high quality of pre-primary school education can lead children to be successful in academics for years to come (Burchinal *et al*, 2010). Parents and guardians send their children to Pre-primary schools due to different reasons. Some send children to a certain school because of social, physical and psychological issues. Some parents send their children to pre-primary believing that they build good foundation for the child's academic future (Adzima, 2014).

Different cultures have different reasons for choosing a particular school for their children. For instance Whitehead (2012) explained the situation in USA which leads parents to take their children to pre-primary school of their choice. The issues of educational philosophy of pre-primary, pre-primary teacher's qualification and experiences, active plays, regular naps,

¹ Local Government Training Institute, email: michael.msendekwa@lgti.ac.tz, +255682982634

² Teachers Service Commission, E mail: ashalubuva@yahoo.com, Cell: +255 757 871 021

meals and snacks, potty training procedures, disciplines handling and references are the most important factors to consider in choosing a child's pre-primary in America.

Independent Schools' Association of Southern Africa (ISASA) (2009) of South Africa suggested that before a parent drops out their precious child with a stranger, they need to consider factors like pre-primary registration, practical consideration, securities and teacher-child relations. This implies that parents make concrete decisions in choosing pre-primary for their children. Therefore, choosing pre-primary school depends on different factors parents want.

The researchers became interested in this area because of the problems that face parents around every December when parents are seeking for best schools for their children. This study has come at the right time as the government has announced all ministries to move from Dar es Salaam to Dodoma. Moving from Dar es Salaam to Dodoma will even widen and increase the talk about which schools are suitable for their children. The study wanted to document empirical evidence of what factors parents consider in selecting schools for their children. The findings are of paramount important for the government and private sector to see what are the real demand of patents in Dodoma City when it comes to the issue of school selection.

2. THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS AND REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

This study was guided by Rational Choice Theory (RCT). Rational Choice Theory was developed by Scott in 1945 to explain an individual's decision making and actions. Rational Choice Theory assumes that individuals will choose actions rationally, based on prioritizing preferences and values to maximize benefits or rewards, and minimize costs or risks (Coleman and Fararo, 1992).

In educational perspectives, the RCT governs the basic understanding of school choice. The theory follows the belief that all parents make decisions based on preferences that are constricted by real-world circumstances. The Rational Choice Theory can be explained as the process of determining what options are available and then choosing the most preferred one according to some consistent criterion. The theory starts with the idea that individuals have preferences and choose according to those criteria. This theory is relevant to this study because it is used in education literature to understand school selection patterns (Wilson, 2016). The Rational Choice Theory assumes that parents and students are consumers in education market (Kelly, 2007). Therefore, when there are many schools, parents will desire and then select the highest academic alternative for their children. As this study seeks to understand criteria parents use to choose a particular pre-primary school, the RCT governs this study by making preferences and then ends up with the choice of the best preference.

Research findings indicate that high quality pre-primary schools education can make children to be academically well in years ahead. So, most parents choose pre- schools for their children by considering several criteria (Bosetti, 2007). A study done by Cowen Institute (2011) in America indicated that parents take their children to a pre-primary school after considering criteria like good teachers, strong curriculum, and school safety. Overall socio-economic status of parents has been discussed as one of the important criteria of choosing pre-primary school for children in developing countries. McEvoy (2003) conducted a study about criteria parents use to choose schools for their children in Ireland. Findings indicated that parental choice of school is closely related to the amount of social, cultural and economic

capital parents possess. In Australia, the main factors affecting school choice are proximity of school, academic and religious reasons (Goh and Dolnicar, 2006).

A study done by Bosetti (2007) using Rational Choice Theory to understand how parents selected schools for their children found that many parents desired small class size when selecting non religious private schools. Parents also ranked shared values when selecting religious schools. They also consider proximity from their home when selecting public schools. Quality academic was also selected when choosing alternative schools. Chang'ach (2012) found that in Kenya, parents consider availability of competent teachers, type of curriculum, discipline, learning/teaching facilities being the major determinants of school choice.

In Tanzania, pre-primary education is mandatory to children before starting Standard One (URT, 2014). Parents send their children to pre-primary schools as an educational requirement. However, there is very little and limited research regarding what makes parents choose specific pre-primary schools for their children. With today's increase of pre-primary schools in Tanzania including Dodoma City and the context created by insufficient information about the criteria parents use to choose specific pre-primary schools necessitate the need of this study. Therefore, this study explored criteria that parents use in choosing pre-primary schools for their children.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study used phenomenology design as it focuses on how respondents experience the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). Respondents from this study consisted of 55 parents who were chosen by simple random sampling in order to get a sample which is more representative (table 1). The researchers first chose the five schools using a simple random sampling technique where by all pre-primary schools in Dodoma City which are in Mjini Division had equal chance of being selected. Thereafter, researchers visited the schools to get parents profiles searching for gender, level of education and the parents domicile location from schools which formed the three strata. The sample obtained consisted of mainly three demographics of gender, level of education and the location of parents stay. Purposive sampling was picked in the sense that the study was limited to parents only. So, it was purposely to get information from parents only.

Table 1: Sample Composition and size

Gender	Frequency	Percent (%)
Male	21	38.18
Female	34	61.82
Total	55	100

Data for this study were collected using interview, focus group discussion and documentary review. Parents were interviewed one by one using an interview guide. The interview guide had a list of eight reasons for parents selecting pre-primary schools for their children. Parents were told to choose the best five reasons from the mentioned list or any other out of the list they felt were the best ones. Thereafter parents were grouped into four groups of 14, 14, 14 and 13 respectively for discussion to provide information about the criteria they use in choosing pre-primary schools for their children and where they got information about the school. The focus group discussion was conducted to establish where and when parents drop and pick up their children and during visiting days. The purpose of focus group discussion was to develop a broad and deep understanding about reasons parents use to select pre-

primary schools for their children. During documentary review the researchers checked the returned questionnaire forms for students' admission where they provided reasons for selecting that particular school and where they got information about the school.

Data Analysis

The data obtained from interviews and focus group discussions and documentary review were analyzed through theme development analysis. The study used three main stages in analyzing data as suggested by Miles and Huberman (2014) as follows; First, the researchers listened carefully to recorded conversation; transcribed the interviews from the recorded conversation into paper. The language used was the national language (Swahili) because the researchers were not sure if all parents understand English. Second, themes were picked by organizing them basing on research objectives. Third, the researchers identified the phrases used frequently and organized the main ideas by coding. This enabled the study to indentify themes, recurring ideas and pattern of beliefs that link people and setting together.

Finally, descriptive wording was converted into categories related to topics so as to reduce the long list that was obtained. Each category was coded to and arranged alphabetically and each category was grouped in place for preliminary analysis and data recording. The obtained themes were put into bar chats to compare the most frequent reasons parents provided.

However, data triangulation was the approach that helped to achieve validity of the data. According to Yeasmin and Rahman (2012) triangulation of data is a process of verification that increase the validity by incorporating several viewpoints and methods, like multiple theories and empirical materials to overcome the weakness and problem of using singles. It is argued that triangulation helps to control bias (Golafshani, 2003). In this type of triangulation, Patton(1990) focuses on to comparing the data collected from different sources, that is, perspectives from different points of views so as to come up with a single idea which becomes consistent. So, the researchers followed the triangulation of data to ensure validity of the study findings. Results from interviews, focus group discussion and documentary review were compared and the similar emerged reasons for picked similar reasons were taken.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The study findings are based on two specific objectives which are: to identify factors influencing parents in choosing pre-primary schools for their children; and examining ways that parents use to get information about pre-primary schools for their children. A sample of 65 respondents was expected to participate in the study. However, only 55 respondents participated equivalent to 84.61% of the expected participants. The distribution of respondents basing on their demographic characteristics is shown in table 2.

Table 2: Gender of Respondents

Religion	n (55)	Percent (%)
Male	21	38.18
Female	34	61.82
Total	55	100

Table 3: Religions Affiliation of Respondents

Religion	n (55)	Percent (%)
Christian	31	56.36
Muslim	18	32.73
Other	6	10.91
Total	55	100

Factors Influencing Parents Decision to Choose Pre-primary for their Children

In addressing this research objective, three instruments were used to gather data. Interview, focus group discussion and documentary review. Findings in Table 4 rank the first five (5) reasons for a parent to select a particular pre-primary school during interviews. Reasons are arranged from the highest number of parents ranked (affordable school fees) to the lowest ranked (distance from home to school).

Table 4: Reasons for Selecting Pre-primary Schools

Reasons	n (55)	Percent (%)	Rank
Affordable school fees	46	83.6	5
Academic quality	51	92.7	2
Language of instruction	49	89.1	3
Class size	52	94.5	1
Distance (Home to school)	34	61.8	6
Average of respondents to each selection	46.2	84.34	4

During focus group discussion respondents were grouped into four groups of 14 people. Respondents were provided with eight (8) reasons for selecting schools then followed by a discussion to rate the reasons. Respondents were asked the most reason followed by the second until the fifth one. The researchers scored the reasons as respondents agreed to each other. The following were the reasons parents ranked according to their priorities: Academic quality was mentioned as the first, followed by affordable school fees. Class size was mentioned the third while language of instruction was the fourth. The fifth reason was distance from home to school.

During documentary analysis, the researchers went through students' admission forms to check reasons parents provided to select particular schools. Researchers went through all 55 forms filled by parents. In the admission forms, parents were asked to fill three major reasons for selecting the particular school. Parents filled different reasons like academic quality, class size, language of instruction, good teachers, good curriculum, having extracurricular activities such as sports, school having buses and short distance from school where children stay. After sorting the reasons parents mentioned, it was found that 48 (87.2%) parents out of 55 selected academic quality being their first reason. Affordable school fees were mentioned as the second reason by 41 parents (74.5%) followed by language of instruction which was mentioned by 37 parents (67.2%) and the fourth was class size which was selected by 32 (58.1%) parents. After combining results of the three instruments, the ranking of the results are summarized in figure 1.

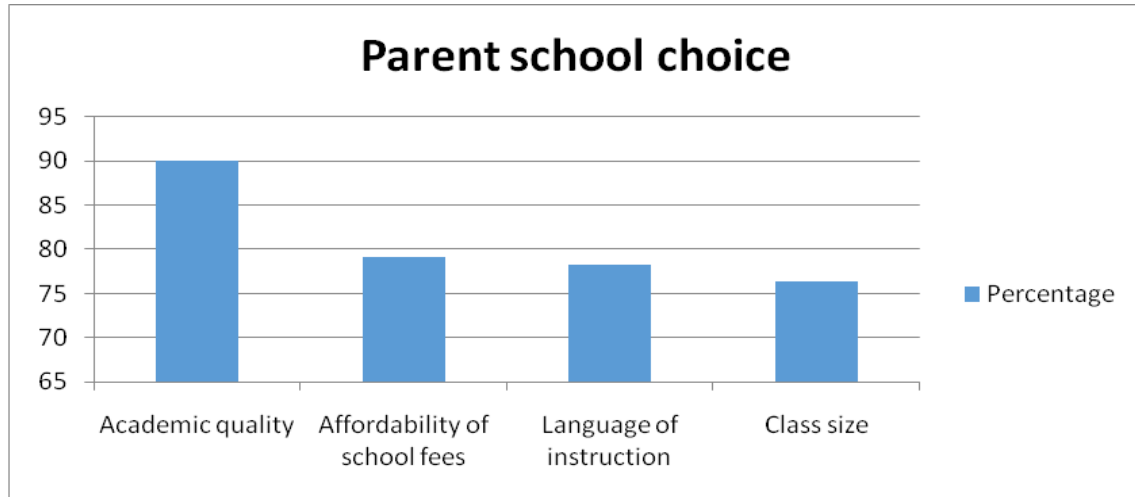


Figure 1: Parent's choice of school

Academic Quality

Parents considered academic quality to be the most outstanding factor to be considered in selecting pre-primary school for their children. This selection was backed up by statements that academic was the reason for sending children to school. This observation is similar to Maddus and Marion (1995), Schneider *et al.*, (2000), Tedin and Weiher (2004), Teske *et al.*, (2007) and Stein *et al.*, (2011) who found that parents considered academic quality as the most important factor in selecting schools for their children.

Affordability of School Fees

Due to parents' economic status, they considered schools which charge affordable school fees. Parents argued that a range of TShs. 700,000.00 – 1,000,000.00 per annum can be considered as affordable to them. It was described that parents from low income families were affected more with the amounts the pre-primary school fee compared to parents from high income families. The study agrees with Brennan (2015) who suggested that affordability still looms large when parents have to decide on the pre-primary school of their children. This finding is also similar to what Beavis (2004) found in Australia that parents considered affordability of school fees when selecting schools for their children.

Language of Instruction

The language of instruction was the third factor parents consider in choosing pre-primary school for their children in Dodoma City. Some parents claimed that they wanted a school that uses English language when teaching so as to let the children get used to the language and some wanted a school that uses Swahili as a language of instruction. This reminded the researchers of the debate of language of instruction in Tanzania for primary schools which has not reached a consensus. Parents who preferred English Language commented that English was a global language that everyone needs to know. Those in favour of Swahili language argued that children should be taught by the language they are familiar with in order to master the subjects. The opinion of using Swahili is in line with a study done by Brennan (2015) suggested that children must be taught by their local language for children to pick up the language, and also an opportunity for them to integrate at a deeper level into the culture of their home town.

Class Size

Parents considered class size as the fourth factor for selecting schools for their children. Parents believe that if children are few in class can be well monitored by teachers. Another

advantage they mentioned with few children in class is that every child can be involved in class as well as reached by the teacher. The Tanzania Education and Training Policy of 2014 stipulate a total of 45 students in class as the accepted number. The choice of few children in class is supported by a study done by Blatchford (2007); Ravitch (2013) who found that class size had a large academic achievement impact on students. Ravitch also argued that fewer students in class encourage social discourse and critical thinking skills.

Parents’ sources of Information about Pre-primary schools for their Children

During interview parents mentioned several ways they used to get information about schools. The mentioned sources were through churches, mosques, TV and radio advertisements, posters, hear from friends and parents live nearby schools. In order to validate the responses provided during interviews, group discussions sessions were held. Findings in figure 2, reveals that most parents (86%) ranked church as the first source of information, mosque were ranked the second with 78% while posters were ranked third with 70%. Other ways were that of hearing from friends (68%), parents live near schools (68%) and television was ranked the fifth with 57%. These findings were also validated by checking students’ admission forms which described mostly that parents heard from churches, mosques, friends, posters and Television.

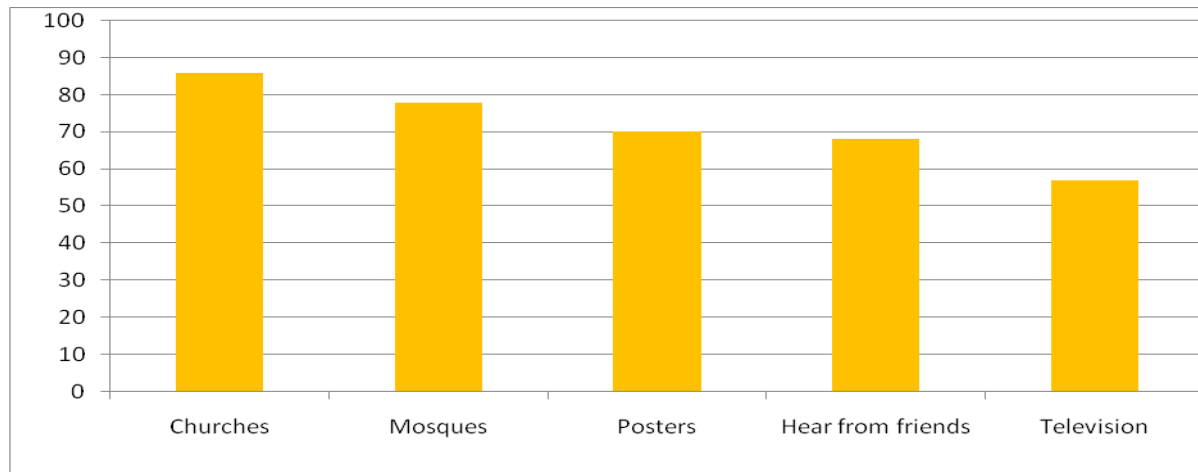


Figure 2: Parents’ Sources of Information about Pre-primary schools

From figure 2, parents responded to have used churches (86%) and mosques (78%) mostly as sources of information in getting best school. This is due to the reasons that churches and mosques serve and reach a big population and it is believed that schools that belong to churches and mosques tends to perform well not only in academics and even in children behavioral aspects.

Using posters in providing information about pre-primary schools happened to be another door that parents use to get information. Generally, posters consist of illustrative pictures/photographs; artwork and printed work used as communicative advertisements presented in concise forms for public display. They are not just pictorial, but visual presentation of simple, brief and well-articulated summary of written works to stimulate an audience. This encompasses wall, and the newspapers. However, this faces some challenges as only literate parents were able to use this way. The reasons that parents prefer posters are that there are no payments needed in reading posters and they provide rich information about a school. Regarding the discussion of ways that parents use to get information about pre-primary schools, Neighborhoods appeared to be the way that parents use to get information

about schools. Parents live in places nearby schools so they get information by visiting schools as quick and as cheaper than parents live far from schools.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1. Conclusion

The study sought to explore factors parents consider in selecting pre-primary schools for their children as well as identifying ways parents use to get school information. Findings revealed that parents consider four major factors namely academic quality, affordability of school fees, language of instruction and class size in school selection. Parents pointed out several ways they use to get information about school. Mostly they get information through churches, mosques, posters, friends as well as their proximity to schools where physical visits are easy.

5.2. Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following are recommended: first, the government should continue insisting about academic quality to all its schools so that parents do not need to go far away searching for schools. Second, the government may consider regulating school fees for private schools so that can be affordable to most parents. The government should continue making sure that resources are equally distributed to all pre-primary schools including teachers so as each school can have sufficient resources for implementation of the school curriculum. Also, the issue of class size should be closely looked at in order to implement what the policy states.

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