

School Choice: Demands and Expectations of Chilean Families According to How Much They Pay for Education

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Abstract

In the early 1980's an education policy in Chile was formulated that encouraged the private sector to participate more strongly in the delivery of the educational service, with the purpose to achieve to have more students attending the education system and decentralize the education responsibility from the State. On the other hand, in the 1990's it was introduced as a mixed funding mechanism that allowed schools to charge a fee to the families and also receive a public funding. These two neoliberal policies led to the generation of an educational quasi-market model based in the belief of academic freedom of schools and families. From the perspective of rational choice theory, families are expected to choose the school based on academic and quality factors, therefore schools are necessarily forced to improve in this area and the education in Chile will gradually improve.

In this article we analyze the school choice process for Chilean families across the 30 years have passed from the implementation of the first education policy around school choice. The purpose is to understand this process from the perspective of how much parents are willing to pay to reach their demands and expectations when they made their choice. This aim is situated as a national problem where school choice in the Chilean context has not been successful in terms of improvement of the education quality. The information that we used is from a quantitative study, which applied a survey to 1,811 parents. From an education policy approach the contribution of this study is to understand from an economic and sociological view the process of parental choice, and to suggest a more effective policy around school choice.

School choice

The concept of school choice has been discussed over recent times by different disciplinary perspectives, from the economic through social sciences lenses. In the first perspective, parental choice is considered to be part of a rational choice driven by the market forces around education. The first economist who addressed the topic of freedom of choice was Milton Friedman (1955; 1962), when he supported the idea of school vouchers.

In the social sciences field, the discussion around school choice has led to ideas about: a) how to regulate the education market (Maroy, 2000; 2008); b) strategies of social classes applied at the moment of choosing (Ball, 1995; 2003; van Zanten, 2007; 2012) and c) social segregation (Dupriez, 2006; 2008).

The school choice process has its supporters and its detractors. Those who believe in the power of the market in education suggest that giving the right to the parents to choose the school for

their children, will allow schools to compete between them and raise the academic standards as a result. This positive vision about school choice is implicitly based on the assumption that parents choose schools that are more effective in increasing the levels of academic achievement (Burgess; Greaves; Vignoles & Wilson, 2009). On the other hand, critics of school choice process, argue that parents really do not choose based on the academic achievements of the institution, but rather by other factors such as the ethnic and social composition, and proximity and geographical location of the school. Elacqua, Schneider & Buckley (2006), determined in their study that this situation in the Chilean context could lead to an increase of the stratification, as parents of high status choose high-performing schools and parents of low incomes will be left behind in the low-performing schools.

Many studies had tried to prioritize and classify the main reasons for the parental school selection in different social, school and local contexts. The first agreement in these studies is that parents mention as the main reason for the election the academic quality of the school. No agreement is made whether this first reason is the same for all parents. Teske, Fitzpatrick & Kaplan (2007) determined that low-income parents seem to give equal weight to aspects of the school, especially for those parents with higher incomes. Also, academic quality, through various measures, is the number one factor. On the other hand, Burgess, Greaves, Vignoles, & Wilson (2009) state that the reasons cited for school choice varies in different types of parents. Parents more educated and with higher socioeconomic status are more likely to cite academic standards and have a better impression of the school in general; while parents of low education and low socioeconomic status are more likely to cite the proximity of the school as the main reason. Another interesting issue of the parental school choice process is that there is vast evidence that shows that parents said that they do not care how the social composition of the school is, but in practice this is a relevant factor when choosing. While some parents cited social class as an optional factor in the choice of the school, most parents only include schools with similar student demographics in their set of choice (Elacqua, Schneider & Buckley, 2006).

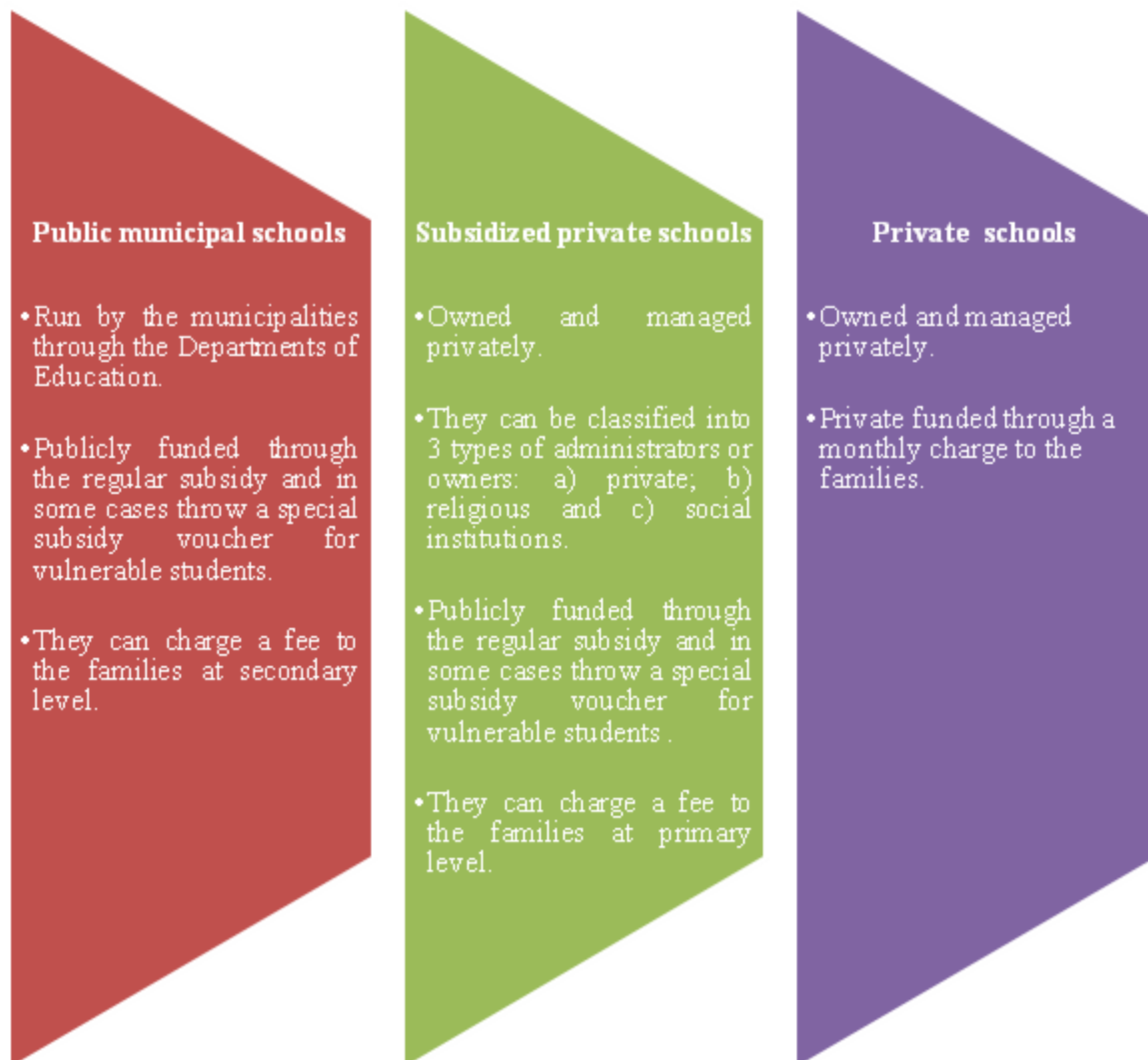
There are different mechanisms involved to achieve a successful election process :“(...) *parents rely on multiple sources of information to learn about their options, but some sources are more important and trustworthy than others. The main source of information comes from ‘word of mouth’, either from friends or school personnel*” (Teske, Fitzpatrick & Kaplan, 2007, p.26). So, when it comes the time to choose a specific school, the ‘word of mouth’ of the family, friends and social networks is what most parents trust. Also there are other mechanisms, such as: visit the school with or without the child; enquire through printed information about the school; attend parent fair or meetings; and, use the information of the school websites and the information of parent center.

In the Chilean education system, the type of school is very important in the act of choosing, this due to the existence of academic freedom as a fundamental principle in the system and the stratification of low and high performance schools. Lately, many subsidized private schools in Chile have entered the system and have settled in districts of disadvantaged middle class families, in response to parental demand for more private schools and the increased of government incentives to educate disadvantaged children (Joiko, 2011). This indicates that parents, generally, have more school choices available to them. Also, Chile has a heightened view that private education is always better than public, but a variety of studies have failed to confirm this. This finding suggests that rather than academic excellence, parents seek social

distinction when they are choosing a private school. To understand better how the parent choice of school is done in Chile, we present a brief description of the type of schools. See Figure 1.

Figure 1

Types of Schools in Chile



Source: own elaboration

In relation to the stages of the election process of a school, Raczynski (2008) determined that in the Chilean context, the choice of an educational institution is not a one moment decision; instead it represents a process that has stages. When this process begins, the duration, protagonists and the reasons that move the action of choosing, vary by the family's social class, cultural context and social representations. There are two general stages of this process: 1) the first stage, we considered the exclusion of some schools due to economic, social and

geographical reasons; and 2) the second stage focused with the election itself when parents look for the most appropriate school for their children.

In relation to the education spending, Elacqua & Martinez, (2011) considered that nowadays middle-class Chilean parents are gathering more information; traveling greater distances and are willing to pay higher rates for better schools. Thus today, parents generally have more school choices available for them. However, there is not much diversity in the educational mission and pedagogy of the schools, and most of the educational options available to these parents are low-performance schools that do not have a consistent record. The few schools of high performance in the market tend to have excessive requirements and charge higher rates.

Methodology

This research seeks to determine the demands and expectations of the chosen school by the families according to how much they pay for education. For the data collection we used a survey that was designed to study how the parental election process is done in middle class Chilean families. The survey was applied between the months of March and June 2012, to 1,811 parents. For this article we used the information of the parents that declared how much they paid for their children's schooling, therefore the total of parents will be 292. See Table 1.

Table 1

The Minimum and Maximum Amount Paid for Schooling

Descriptive Statistic				
	N° cases	Minimum (USD\$)	Maximum (USD\$)	Mean (USD\$)
How much do you pay for education?	292	2,1	137	44,5

Families were grouped according to how much they pay for education, in four categorical ranges as depicted in Table 2. Table 3 represents the variables of schooling and the categories that emerged.

Table 2

Range by Frequency and Percent

Ranges (USD\$)	Frequencies	Percent
Range 1: 2 to 21	87	29,8%
Range 2: 21 to 42	89	30,5%
Range 3: 42 to 63	74	25,3%
Range 4: 63 to 137	42	14,4%
Total	292	100,0%

Table 3

Variables of Schooling and the Categories

Variables	Categories
Range payment for education (USD\$)	Range 1: \$2 to \$21 dollars
	Range 2: \$21 to \$42 dollars
	Range 3: \$42 to \$63 dollars
	Range 4: \$63 to \$137 dollars
Type of School	Public municipal schools
	Subsidized private schools
Social mix and academic results	Preferences for a school with good level of peers and families, above academic results
	Preferences for good academic results, above peers and families
Reasons to pay for the child's education	Training in principles and values
	Good academic results to continue studies
	Safe environment, free of drugs, violence and crime
	Demanding and disciplined school environment
	Holistic education
Opinion of the school amount fee	Appropriate charge to the education and attention given to students
	High charge to the education and attention given to students
	Low charge to the education and attention given to students
The more families pay, the better the education their children receive	Totally agree
Schools where parents pay for their children's education are they better than free schools?	Yes
	No
	Sometimes

The analysis established four groups. Table 4 depicts the number of cases classified in each of the groups, which analyzed whether each had a sufficient number of subjects to support a subsequent analysis.

Table 4

Number of Cases by Group

Number of cases by group		
Group	Frequencies	Percent
1	39	18,8%

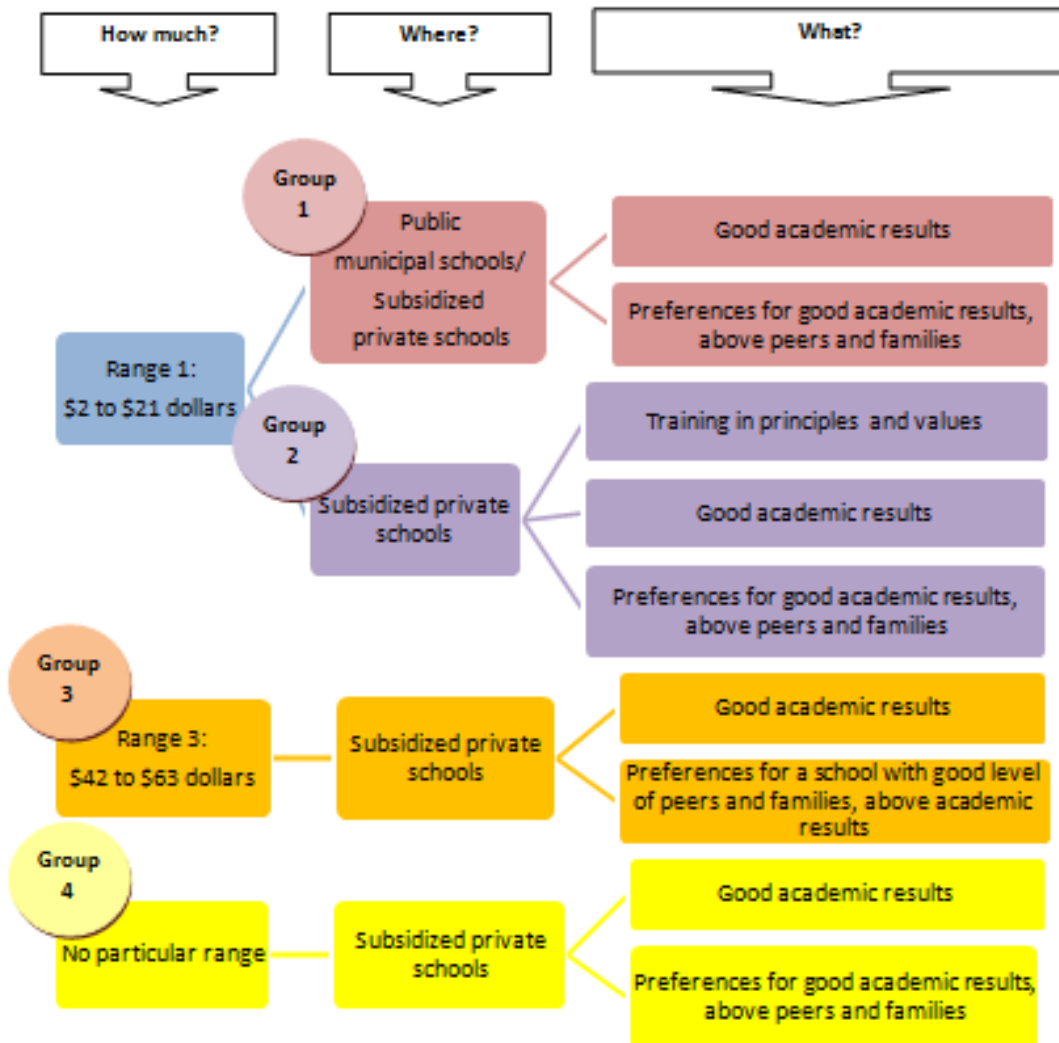
2	39	18,8%
3	75	36,1%
4	55	26,4%
Total	208	100,0%
Lost	84	-----

Results

Each group consisted of the following characteristics as depicted in Figure 2 according to the expectations and demands of families when they pay for their school choice.

Figure 2

Four groups and their respective school choice



- 18.8% of the parents of the survey belong to **group 1**. These parents are characterized to choose a public or a subsidized private school, paying a low fee between \$2 to \$21 dollars. Even though they do not spend a lot of money, they are worried about the academic results of the school. That is interesting in a school system like the Chilean where academic performances are situated in the school with high fees. Also this group of parents prefers to give up the social homogeneity to have a school that has a proven well performance in academic issues. They mention as the main reason to pay for the education is to ensure a good education for their children, so they can continue their studies. These types of parents expect a lot from the school, even the price they pay is too low to really receive what they are wishing for.
- 18.8% of the parents belong to **group 2**. The main characteristic of these parents is that they prefer to pay for the education of their children in a private institution. Not only allowing them to expect high academic results but also the training in principles and values. Private institutions are generally related in Chile with religious congregations. Also, as with group 1, they are more worried about academic results than the kind of families that go into the school. Finally we can say that parents have very high expectations in relation to the low budget they are willing to spend for education
- The largest numbers of parents in the survey were in **group 3**, representing 36.1%. These parents are willing to pay a high fee for the education of their children. Also, we can assume that because they pay a high fee, they prefer to choose between private subsidized schools that in Chile have a better reputation in terms of academic performance. This has been a long discussion in Chilean education research (Bellei, 2007) because many studies had concluded that the difference between public and private subsidized are not such, but is rather a social image about private education versus public. The main reason why this group of parents pays, is to ensure a high academic performance; also they are very worried about their peers, they are willing to pay for good academic results combined with social homogeneity
- Finally, **group 4** represents 26.4% of the parents. These parents are from a different range of school fees, where within the same group there are low and high fees together. They share their wish to enrolled their children in private subsidized schools, where students can perform academically well and they are not concerned about homogeneous social status among parents at the school

Final discussion

This study of school preferences of the middle class has been examined from various perspectives. DeJarnatt. (2006) studied the myths of school choice among middle class families. The results related that debt increased for middle class in the housing issue with the family investment to ensure a better quality of education for their children. This shows that education and school choice lies many times within a higher level of family logistics, being sometimes even important to consider the neighborhood of residence at the time of choosing.

On the other hand, middle-class parents characteristics toward education can be characterized as: a) Selfish individualism exacerbated by the increasing privatization, consumerism and market culture (Reay, Crozier, James, Hollingworth, Williams, Jamieson, & Beedell, 2008) b) they share a similar vision of what a good education is, consisting in intellectual development, academic results and a happy school experience at the individual level, as well as, a concern for equality and integration at the collective level (van Zanten, & Maroussia, 2007); c) and finally, they handle a broad understanding of what quality education constitutes, which includes various dimensions within cognitive learning which is not unique or central (Raczynski, & Hernández, 2010).

From an education policy approach the contribution of this study is to understand from economical and sociological views the processes of parental choice which suggest a more effective policy around school choice and quality improvement on education. Some of the recommendations are:

1. More **transparency** regarding what parents pay and what they receive in return. The increasing school choice process has introduced a new dynamic around families more related with the choice of a luxury good rather than public or basic one.
2. Following the above idea, there should be more **regulation of excessive charges** without the expected results in academic performance.
3. Allow parents to **gather information from other sources** such as instruments that measure and indicate the social composition of the school, cost and benefit of the school, etc.
4. Public policy relating to education must **learn to listen and understand** families, principals, teachers, so that through them it will be easier to elaborate an effective school choice policy. You cannot develop a policy with just reading a few research papers and technical documents; public policy needs to face the reality on how in practice families are choosing their schools of choice.

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