

## Secondary School Choice – What Do Parents Concern?

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### **Abstract**

There has been an increase in the students' enrolment to the private schools across Malaysia. The shift in the parents' preference on the selection of secondary school has been predominantly attributed to the dissatisfaction with the current school education system. Subsequently, this study attempts to study the factors that affect parents' preferences in selecting the secondary school for their children. Four factors namely school characteristics, school environment, social influences and the parents-administration-teachers (PAT) relationship that are related to school choice were examined in this study. 203 representative elements were drawn using judgmental sampling technique and structural equation modelling (SEM) analysis was used to analyse the data collected. The findings showed that all factors significantly affect the parents' preferences in selecting the secondary school for their children. Comparatively, the effect of school environment on the parents' preferences was found slightly lower than social influences, school characteristics, and PAT relationship. This study accordingly puts forward several implications for both academics and practitioners alongside recommendations for future researchers.

### **Keywords:**

Parents' preferences, Secondary school choice, SEM analysis

### **INTRODUCTION**

As the completion of primary education has been made compulsory in almost all countries, focus has been shifted to the secondary school education (Ahmad & Cohen, 2014; UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2011). To date, secondary school education has been receiving substantial attention of various stakeholders across the globe. It is deemed vital not only in bridging the primary education to the tertiary education but also to the labour market (Dewan, 2011; UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2011). Irina Bokava, the Director-General of UNESCO, had asserted the importance of secondary school education by attributing it as a fundamental for youth to acquire an adequate knowledge and skills in having a decent livelihood in today's competitive globalised economic and competitive world (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2011). Thus, parents' deliberation in selecting the most appropriate secondary school has become ever imperative chiefly due to the options available (Forster, 2016; Muhriz & Wan-Jan, 2011; Lawrence & Mollborn, 2013). Mushrooming of private schools has embroidered the school choice of parents where the consideration and comparison of the private and public school has become the sensation among parents worldwide.

School choice is indeed a high involvement consumer decision making process. Bedrick (2013) had quoted an astonishing statistic from the study which discovered that 93% of the parents participated have had admitted that they have been spending more efforts on the school choice particularly by finding sufficient information about schools. This might due to the parents' school choice is always based on the best interest of their children (Bosetti, 2004) and the parents often opted for the alternatives when they are not convinced with the quality and compatibility of the present school's system (e.g. Bosetti, 2004; Burgess, 2009; Poikolainen, 2012; Yacoob, Osman, & Bachok, 2014a)

It was indeed evidenced through the growth of private schools in Malaysia which had essentially outperformed the growth of the public schools in year 2011 (Kementerian Pelajaran Malaysia, 2012). As of 2011, about 145, 000 children aged between 7 to 17 year old were reported to have enrolled in the private schools. Though such enrolment rate represents a mere 4% of the children within the said age group in Malaysia, however, it signalled a shift of the parents' preference in school choices.

Thus, it is a must for both private and public school operators to understand the concerns of parents in selecting the school. Nevertheless, a glance on the recent past studies revealed that focus was rather placed on the parents' decision in selecting private school (e.g. Adebayo, 2009; Yacoob et al. 2014a). Despite being informative, such researches would not be able to portray the comprehensive decision making process of the parents as the consideration on the public school has not been factored in. Despite the abundant number of past studies (e.g. Badri and Mohaidat, 2014; Beamish & Morey, 2013; Chumacero, Gómez, & Paredes, 2011; James & Woodhead, 2014; Whitsel, 2014) which examined the school choice and its determinants, there is a lack of consensus on the determinants of school choice. This warrants a need to study the factors influence the parents' decision on that selecting the most appropriate school irrespective of their nature – private or public school education.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **School Choice**

School choice is about selecting the preferred school from the available options (Burgess, Greaves, Vignoles & Wilson, 2009; Nuraihan, Mariana, & Syahriah, 2014; Wilson, 2015). Boselovic (2015) added that each schooling option must be unique; otherwise, parents may just simply enrol their children to the nearest school without any thoughtful evaluation. Hossler and Gallagher (1987) classified the college choice decision making process into three stages namely predisposition, search and choice. Assuming that the parent intention to enrol their children for the next level of education is clear, the information of the alternatives would be the parents' main priority which in turn affect their final decision after the thoughtful evaluation on the each option available (Prothero, 2015). Therefore, school choice is best to be attributed as the parents' decision in selecting the best secondary school for their children upon evaluating the information gathered on the options available.

Forster (2016)'s study had discovered the positive impacts of school choice. Foster's content analysis on the past empirical studies dated 2013 and later found that school choice had indeed resulted in a positive impact on the students' overall performance, students' academic performance and civic values besides reducing the government's expenditures and racial segregation among students. This evidences that school choice would be resulting in a win-win situation for all the stakeholders – government, parents, students and school operators.

### **School Characteristics**

School characteristics are seen as one of the key determinants alongside the characteristics of students on the educational performance and hence the school choice of parents. There have been abundance of researches focusing on the school characteristics and the resulting impacts where most of the findings were found to be inconsistent to one another (Alves, Elacqua, Koslink, Martinez, Santos & Urbina, 2015; Chowa, Masa, Ramos, & Ansong, 2015).

Chumacero, Gómez, and Paredes (2011) had carried a survey on the households in Chile on their school choice and respective key determinants. Of the four key determinants i.e. distance to school, quality of school programs, tuition fee and alternative schools, both location and quality of schools were ranked as the key determinants of the school choice.

The cost of schooling is the fundamental aspect of school characteristics (Avery & Hoxby, 2004) that influence the parents' decision in selecting the school (Whitsel, 2014). Researchers (i.e. Gouda, Chandra Das, Goli, & Maikho Apollo Pou, 2013; James & Woodhead, 2014) who carried out research in India had unanimously concluded that the cost of schooling in the private school is higher as compared to the cost of schooling in the government schools in India. Irrespective of the daunting school fees, parents nowadays are known to select the best school occasionally based on their affordability even such decision requires parents' financial scarifies .

School quality has been widely used to infer the academic performance of students and hence it has become the typical criteria of school choice (Pagano and Terkla, 1991 as cited in Furukawa, 2011). School quality accompanied by appropriate class size and improved teaching quality was found to positively affect the academic performance (Bernal, Mittag, & Qureshi, 2016). Similarly, Chowa, et al. (2015) found that class size in addition to the sanitation facilities were significantly affecting the academic achievement of Ghanian junior students. On the other hand, location of the school has been deemed vital for many parents nowadays due to the increasing transportation resulted from the hike in the fuel price (Alves, et al., 2015) particularly for the lower income families (Chumacero, et al., 2011).

A good reputation is indeed vital for any organizations including academic institutions in order to command the confidence of the stakeholders and hence to strategically position in the market (Vidaver-Cohen, 2007). The parents' satisfaction was empirically proven as the antecedent of the school reputation, which, in turn leads to loyalty in the study conducted by Skallerud (2011) in Norway. The typology of Skallerud (2011) was reinforced with the study by Badri and Mohaidat (2014) who surveyed the parents in United Arab Emirates. They concluded that school reputation has essentially influenced the parents' loyalty and hence their school choice. Discussions above highlight the importance of school characteristics (i.e. location, reputation, quality, and cost) on the parents' school choice. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1: School characteristics have the significant positive effect on the parents' school choice.

### **School Environment**

According to the Planning Guide for Maintaining School Facilities (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, & National Forum on Education Statistics, 2003), a comfortable and safe physical school environment is important to ease the teaching and learning process in order to achieve academic excellence. Similarly, the school facilities and equipment would influence the teaching and learning environment which, in turn, have a positive impact on the students' academic performance (Hsu & Yuan-fang, 2013; Nuraihan, et al., 2014). The studies conducted by Yacob, Osman, and Bachok (2014b) and Nuraihan, et al. (2014) indicated that school environment is an important factor for Malaysian in choosing the school for the children. Parents tend to choose the private school rather than the public school when they

perceive the quality of the school environment in private school is more conducive. (Yaacob, et al., 2014b). Likewise, the study conducted by Beamish and Morey (2013) on the Australian parents with children attending Christian school found that school environment was indeed an important factor that influenced the parents' school choice. Besides, the safety issue of the learning environment is another key consideration of the parents (Hsu & Yuan-fang, 2013; Skallerud, 2011)

Kuuskorpi, Kaarina, Finland and González (2011) asserted a dynamic teaching and learning environment is required to keep up the pace of technological advancement particularly in the social networks and media. Hence, they suggested that technologies should be integrated into the teaching and learning environment. The use of teaching technologies such as video, projector, power point in teaching were found improve the teaching effectiveness in Tang and Austin (2009) study. Meanwhile, López (2010)'s research findings evidenced that the digital learning classroom increased the student achievement (particularly in the English Learning Learner's learning) as compared to the traditional classroom. Hence, it is reasonable to consider the school which wisely integrates the technologies in the teaching and learning environment would be the preferred option for the parents who care about their children learning performance. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2: School environment have the significant positive effect on the parents' school choice.

### **Social Influences**

The importance of the social influences on one's decision making should not be neglected. Pride, Ferrell, Lukas, Schembri and Niininen (2015) added that word-of-mouth would be significant influence on the purchase decision of costlier and/ or new products or services. Wirtz, Chew and Lovelock (2012) asserted this fact as it is typical for individual to seek for word-of-mouth recommendation when the perceived risk of the actual purchase decision is greater which is typical in the high involvement purchase decision. School choice is indeed a high involvement purchase decision due to its repercussions on the children's academic performance as well as the associated enrolment cost, which is typically applicable for parents who consider private school over public school (Kotler & Armstrong, 2014). Thus, parents who are in the process of selecting school for their children would tend to gather adequate information and advises from various sources especially from friends and family members which are believed to be more trustworthy as compared to the information provided by the school itself.

Social media, a major form of electronic word-of-mouth, is an Internet-based platform which enables users for the multitude social interaction in the form of online reviews, social network and blogs (Ladhari & Michaud, 2015). Instead of limited to face-to-face information sharing, the spread of information is now easier with social media. Parents are able to access the school related information shared on their social network merely through several clicks. Upon reviewing and evaluating the comments or information shared through the social medias, the parents could make the school choice decision (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Prothero, 2015). Subsequently, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H3: Social Influences have the significant positive effect on the parents' school choice.

## **Parent Administration-Teachers Relationship**

A healthy parent-teacher relationship was noted to be the key stimulus for the students' overall achievement (Hughes & Kwok, 2007; Karila & Alasuutari, 2012; Sheridan et al., 2012). Hughes and Kwok (2007) found that lower achievement in early grades among the African American students was due to the less supportive relationship between African American parents and their children with the school teachers as compared their Hispanic and Caucasian counterparts. It was reiterated that parent-teacher relationship is indeed a reciprocal partnership which would be ultimately beneficial for all the stakeholders involved (Karila & Alasuutari, 2012). Likewise, Sheridan, et al. (2012) had demonstrated the significant mediation role of parent-teacher relationship where students demonstrated positive behavioural change i.e. improvement in adaptive behaviour and social skills after 8 weeks of the intervention period. Meanwhile, teachers had acknowledged the improved relationship with parents upon the completion of the intervention period.

On the other hand, Adams and Christenson (2000) found that the improvement of the trust among the parents and teachers only work well through the effective parent-teacher communication. In addition to the trusts, interviews conducted with parents and teachers in the elementary schools in Chicago revealed that "investment in the school community, direct and honest communication, mutual respects and mutual goals" were revealed as the key requirements for an effective communication between parents and teachers (Miretzky, 2004). Another research conducted by Merkley, Schmidt, Dirksen and Fuhler (2006) added that the clear and timely information would mend any possible misconception of the institution, which, in turn, enhances the parents' engagement with the institution and hence affect their school choice. Subsequently, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H4: Parent-teacher relationships have the significant positive effect on the parents' school choice.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

Survey research was conducted in Perak targeting the parents with the children aged 7 to 12 in Perak, Malaysia. Pilot study was initially conducted among 106 parents in order to ensure the quality of research instrument. Upon amending the content of instrument based on the feedbacks obtained from the pilot study, the actual fieldwork was carried out. Meyers, Gamst and Guarino (2013) suggested a research should start with a target ratio of 20 respondents for every variable but subjected to a minimum sample size that not less than 200 respondents for a single research. Accordingly, a total of 210 sets of questionnaire were collected upon filtering the responses from unqualified respondents. Nevertheless, only 203 sets of responses were retained for the further analysis upon going through the data cleaning process. Structural equation modelling (SEM) analysis was then used to analyse the data collected using SmartPLS 3.0.

## **DATA ANALYSIS**

### **Respondents' Profile**

Table 1 summarises the respondents' demographic characteristics. 51% of the respondents have had at least the bachelor's degree. Besides, Chinese is the major ethnic group (57.1%) engaged in this survey followed 18.7% and 17.7% of Malay and Indian respondents respectively.

Moreover, the respondents with the household’s income less than RM 100, 000 per annum made up the majority of the study’s respondents.

**Table 1: Respondents’ Profile**

Category		Frequency	Percentage, %
Respondent’s highest education level	Less than high school	21	10.3
	High school	48	23.6
	Diploma	31	15.3
	Bachelor	73	36.0
	Master/ PhD	30	14.8
Households income per annum	RM50,000 and below	71	35.0
	RM50, 0001 –RM99, 999	60	29.6
	RM100, 000 – RM149, 999	41	20.2
	RM150,000 and above	31	15.3
Ethnic	Malay	38	18.7
	Chinese	116	57.1
	Indian	36	17.7
	Others	13	6.4

**PLS-SEM**

*Factor Analysis*

Composite reliability, convergent validity and discriminant validity were accessed before proceeding to the structural model analysis. The assessment on the composite reliability and construct validity (i.e. convergent and divergent validity) was assessed based on the rule of thumb established by Hair, Black, Babin and Anderson (2010). Initially, 7 items were deleted due to the poor factor loading value (factor loading value < 0.6). The instruments tested had then achieved the required level of composite reliability and convergent validity upon deletion of these items. The composite reliability values exceeded 0.7 and the average of variance (AVE) value of all of the latent factors ranged from 0.547 to 0.826 exceeding the required threshold value of 0.5 (refer to Table 2). In addition, the discriminant validity was also established as the squared root AVE values were greater than the inter-correlation coefficients of the constructs (refer to Table 3).

*Path Analysis*

SmartPLS 3.0 was used to test the structural model and hypotheses. A bootstrapping procedure with 5000 iterations was performed to test the statistical significance of the weights of the exogenous and endogenous variables. Positive significant relationships were found between school characteristics, school environment, social influences and PAT towards the decision of school choice, and hence, all hypotheses were supported. The four variables studied had explained 51.6 % of the variance in parents’ preferences and multicollinearity is not a threat in this analysis (VIF values < 3). Though all exogenous variables positively influenced the parents’ school choice, the effect of school environment ( $\beta = 0.154$ ) on the parents’ preferences was found slightly lower than the effect of social influences ( $\beta = 0.281$ ), school characteristics ( $\beta = 0.211$ ), and PAT relationship ( $\beta = 0.247$ ).

**Table 2: Convergent Validity and Composite Reliability**

	Items	FL	CR	AVE
School Choice				
DV2	I actively search information about the school prior to my children’s enrolment.	0.910	0.905	0.826
DV3	I evaluate the pros and cons of each possible alternative for my children’s schooling.	0.907		
School Characteristics				
Sc1	Reputation of the School is important.	0.746	0.846	0.579
Sc2	The tuition fees should be reasonable.	0.715		
Sc3	The quality of academic program is suitable for my children.	0.812		
Sc5	The syllabus used should be certified by educational regulatory bodies.	0.768		
School Environment				
Se1	The school should be a safe place for learning ensuring the environment is conducive for teaching and learning.	0.821	0.899	0.642
Se2	The classroom’s environment should be conducive.	0.797		
Se3	The school should have sufficient facilities.	0.821		
Se4	The school should have adequate equipment for learning purpose.	0.856		
Se5	School should use technologies in facilitating the teaching process.	0.704		
Social Influences				
Si1	Information shared by friends and family members about the school is important.	0.756	0.784	0.547
Si2	Social media plays important roles in sharing information about the school.	0.771		
Si4	I always share information about school to my friends and family members.	0.690		
Parents-Administration-Teachers (PAT) relationship				
Pat1	Parents should have a good relationship with the administrators of the school.	0.812	0.894	0.629
Pat2	Parents and administrators of the school should be well communicated.	0.804		
Pat3	Parents and teachers should have a good relationship.	0.833		
Pat4	Parents and teachers should be well communicated.	0.851		
Pat5	I prefer to receive information on the school’s upcoming activities online.	0.648		

Remark: Deleted Items: DV1, DV4, DV5, Sc4, Si3, Se6, Pat6,

**Table 3. Discriminant Validity**

	School Choice	School Characteristics	School Environment	Social Influences	PAT Relationship
School Choice	<b>0.909</b>				
School Characteristics	0.586	<b>0.761</b>			
School Environment	0.530	0.622	<b>0.801</b>		
Social Influences	0.566	0.444	0.385	<b>0.740</b>	
PAT Relationship	0.614	0.622	0.552	0.534	<b>0.793</b>

Remark: The **Bold** values are the square root of AVE

**Table 4: Hypothesis Testing**

R <sup>2</sup> = 0.516					
Hypothesis	Links in the model	Standardized Beta, $\beta$	t-statistic	VIF	Results
H1	School Characteristics - School Choice	0.211	2.786	2.027	Supported
H2	School Environment - School Choice	0.154	2.050	1.766	Supported
H3	Social Influences - School Choice	0.281	3.007	1.446	Supported
H4	PAT Relationship - School Choice	0.247	3.560	1.993	Supported

**DISCUSSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS**

This study empirically revealed that all the four hypothesized determinants of school choices namely school environment, school characteristics, social influences and parents-administrator-teachers relationship significantly influenced the parents’ preferences in selecting the secondary school for their children. As a whole, all the four determinants together explained about 51.6 percent of variances in the parents’ school choice. Of the four determinants, Social Influences were found to have the greatest influence on the school choice, followed by the PAT Relationship and Social Characteristics while the least contributing determinant was the School Environment.

Findings of this study pinpointed to the dominance of social media usage in exchanging the information among the surveyed parents within the construct of Social Influences (refer to Table 2). This implies that the domination of Social Influences as compared to other determinants of school choice can be attributed to the widespread use of social media. Social media has stepped in to lead the mode of communication in the modern world where the use of social media is hard to be separated from one’s daily life (Quintana, 2013). Recent statistics demonstrated that the dependency of the popular social media platform such as Facebook and Twitter has had outshined the usage of electronic mails (e-mail) across all the age group (Hajirnis, 2015). The survey carried out by the University of Michigan partnering with Pew Research Centre has had discovered a greater detail of the social media usage by the American parents (Duggan, Lenhart, Lampe, & Ellison, 2015). While more than 75 percent of the surveyed parents utilise the social media as a platform to exchange the parenting related information and gain social support, 76 percent of their social media contacts comprise their “actual” family members and friends (Duggan, et al., 2015).

This suggests that the parents have been using the social media as a mere substitute of the conventional communication channels where they are still predominantly surrounded with people from their social circles and discussing about the parenting issues even on the virtual (social media) world. It opens up new avenues for school operators to be in contact with the parents. School operators shall put more emphasis in establishing and maintaining an appropriate social media presence instead of spending much on the conventional communication platform. Besides, the operators should be even more thoughtful in running their daily operations as information about any crisis in the school can be disseminated to broader target audiences instantly via the social media. Such negative word-of-mouth would then definitely tarnish the image of school in the public eyes.

On the other hand, the current study discovered that the conventional measures of quality schools such as cutting edge facilities as well as the conducive and safe environment were



seemed be less influential on the parents' decision in choosing the school. This implied that parents concerned more on the basic necessities of attending school such as quality teaching and well-being of children instead of additional features of the school i.e. advanced facilities and advantageous environment. The statistical finding in this study is indeed consistent with the research finding of the past studies. Though the study conducted by Beamish and Morey (2013) reported school environment as an important determinant of the parents' school choice, it was ranked only after the determinants of academic characteristics, student care characteristics and school ethos characteristics. Similarly, school environment was indicated as an important but not the main determinant that influenced parents' school choice in Nuraihan, et al. (2014) and Yaacob, et al. (2014b) study.

Hence, the school operators are suggested to put in more efforts to enhance the school quality and the communication between the parents, teachers as well as the school administrators without neglecting the importance of having conducive school environment. School environment was indeed an important factor that has an impact on the parents' school choice though it was found less influence as compared to the other three predictors studied ( $\beta_{\text{School Environment}} = 0.154$ ;  $\beta_{\text{School Characteristics}} = 0.211$ ;  $\beta_{\text{Social Influences}} = 0.281$ ;  $\beta_{\text{PAT Relationship}} = 0.247$ ). Assuming that others factors are the same, a more conducive learning environment is still preferable (Yaacob, et al. 2014b). Therefore, the school operators should provide a safe and conducive environment equipped with sufficient equipment, facilities, and technologies facilitating the teaching and learning process alongside maintaining high school quality and good PAT relationship.

## **LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The statistical findings indicated that school environment has the least influences on the parents' school choice. This finding is remarkable as school environment that has been reported as an influencer of the students' academic performance (Hsu & Yuan-fang, 2013) does not appear as the key influencing factor of the parents' school choice. As the extent of school environment's influence on the parents' school choice is remain unanswered, the school operators would not be able to plan and allocate the budget wisely for the purpose of school development. Therefore, researchers call the attention of the future researchers to consider the mixed method research in order to gather in-depth information on the true interactions between school environment, student performance and parents' school choice.

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