

Admission into Public Secondary Schools in Kenya: Understanding Parental Preferential Limitations

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Abstract

This article reports on the findings of a study that set out to investigate parents' preference of secondary schools that their children joined for form one in 2015. The study adopted a quantitative survey approach involving parents whose children had joined form one (first year in secondary school) this year. Parents were purposively sampled for the study. A questionnaire (both closed and open-ended) was used to collect data. The response rate was 83.3%. The data obtained from the survey and especially closed-ended section of the questionnaire was analysed using the SPSS (Statistical package for social sciences) while data from open-ended section of was used to clarify or reinforce certain aspects of the survey findings. The result reveals that: over 60% of the students obtained 301- 400 marks; over 70% (n=150) of the parents claimed that their children joined secondary schools that were not of their choice; majority of the students joined district and county schools. Some parents describe the schools that their children joined as poor; without appropriate facilities; lacks academic competition or challenges; lacks of motivation for learners and that some of the teachers were lazy. Parents expected or preferred their children to join better schools with track record in academic excellence; schools with better teaching and learning facilities and also that challenges and motivates students academically. They preferred good schools that would enable their children to obtain good grades and join university. The conclusion is that parents in this study prefer their children to join schools that excelled academically. They are however limited in terms of exercising their preferences.

Keywords: Secondary school, form one, satisfaction, parents, preference

1. Introduction

Studies have shown that 'over the years parents have sought best educational experience for their children' through good schools which can equip them with knowledge and skills to face future life challenges and opportunities' (CREST, 1994:1). Consequently, some parents have moved to new locations, others have obtained permits that afford their children opportunity to attend schools in their neighbourhood, district or city and yet others have opted for private schools known as independent schools in the United Kingdom (UK) or chartered schools in United States of America (USA) (CREST, 1994; Delaney, n.d). Evidence indicates that parents are prepared to invest time and resources in choosing a school (OECD, 2015). Therefore, it is no wonder that house prices near top schools in England are more expensive than average, for instance, Beaconfield High School in Buckinghamshire the average price is £797,000 compared to an average price of £314, 000 in the rest of the county (Barrow, 2014). The school's premium is £483,031, the largest one in England (Barrow, 2014).

There are benefits associated with good public schools, private schools and/or chartered schools and include: higher academic achievements, reduced drop-out rates, improved critical thinking skills and stimulating learning environment, among others (Delany, n.d; Davis, 2011). Beans (2004) also cite better discipline, smaller classes and therefore more individual attention, as the reasons offered by parents for wanting their children to attend private schools. Other reasons include, proximity to their home or ease travel, general good impression of the school, good exam results and academic reputation or academic performance and good facilities, among others (Burgess, Greaves, Vignoles and Wilson, 2009; Bosetti, 2014). Therefore parents' school preference is influenced by certain positive school

characteristics. Within the OECD countries, evidence indicates that parents value academic achievement highly (OECD, 2015). Burgess et al. (2014) identifies three main school attributes that families value, they the academic quality of the school, its socio-economic compositions and the home-school distance. In both studies, academic standards or quality is significant.

In the UK and USA, among other developed countries, parents exercise their schools preference through the school choice initiatives or plans (Bosetti, 2014; Burgess et al., 2014; Hastings et al., 2005; Delany, n.d). According to Burgess and his colleagues, school choice in England means the right to express a preference for particular schools they would like their child attend and for each parent's highest preference to be honoured (Burgess et al., 2014). This is achieved through parents completing a common application form for their school district /local authority (LA) on which they nominate at least three schools (Burgess, et al., 2014). However, parents' nomination for school choice is affected by nominations, admission criteria and availability of places (Burgess et al., 2014). Therefore, parents' preferences do not guarantee a place at their desired school (Burgess et al., 2014).

In Kenya, both parents and students highly value graduating from national schools due to their prestige status. National schools are said to be better endowed with resources and facilities, broader courses variety and high quality peer interaction compared to other public secondary schools in Kenya (Onderi and Makori, 2014). Also students are admitted to secondary schools based on their performance on KCPE, preferences and district quotas (Ayodo and Too, 2010). However, there are cases where students have performed well in KCPE but have been admitted to district schools i.e. lower tie schools. This study investigates parents' preferences of secondary schools that their children have joined in 2015.

2. Literature Review

2.1 An understanding of parental school preferences in general

In developed countries such as UK and Und USA among others, parents are able to exercise their preferences regarding the schools that their children join or attend as mentioned earlier and therefore they are not bound by the 'one-size-fit all approach' (Harris and Larsen, 2015). This is possible through the school choice initiatives (Hastings, Kane and Stanger, 2005). The school choice initiatives are underpinned by the belief that, no single model of education is right for every child (Hastings, et al., 2005). However, the choice initiatives is largely based on parents' preferences over school characteristics and how those preferences vary in the population (Hastings et al., 2005). However, the school choice initiative is controversial resulting in two opposing teams, -those who support it and those who are opposed to it. On the one hand those who support the public school choice plan argue that its aim is to improve both equity and efficiency, to provide incentives for schools to compete based on academic performance and to provide broader access to quality schools (Hastings et al., 2005). On the other hand the critics argue that the public school choice will result in what Hastings and his colleagues describes as "vertical separation" such that top students abandon underperforming schools (Hastings et al., 2005: 2). Hastings and his colleagues further observe that "once parents with elasticities depart from their neighbourhood schools; such schools would face little pressure from the remaining students to improve academic achievement" (Hastings et al., 2005:2).

So what is it that parents want from schools? Overall, over the years parents have sought best educational experience for their children, through schools that prepare them for future life challenges and opportunities (CREST, 1994). Some of the characteristics of good schools are contained in the figure One below:

Figure 1: Characteristics of a good school

- *About good schools themselves:*
 - Strong and professional administrators and teachers
 - A broad curriculum available to all students
 - A philosophy that says all children can learn if taught, coupled with high expectations for all students
 - A school climate that is conducive to learning. A good school is safe, clean, caring and well-organised
 - An ongoing assessments system that supports good instruction
 - A high level of parent and community involvement and support
 - Good schools have libraries that are stocked with up-to-date books appropriate for the age and interest level of students; centrally located for ready access by total student body and staff; staffed where possible by a full time librarian on duty daily. All children are taught how to use the library.

- *Good schools have teachers who:*
- Are knowledgeable, professional and well-paid
 - Set challenging classroom assignment that are appropriate to the subject, are interesting and clearly relate to other lessons taught
 - Use a wealth of materials and many different approaches to teaching difficult concepts
 - Maintain discipline in the classroom to foster the optimal learning environment
 - Keep students consistently informed on how they are doing and what they will be doing next and discuss the significant of each step and its relationships to concept previously taught
 - Hold correct certification in the classes they are teaching and have mastered the subject matter
 - Maintain high expectations for students achievement, which is evident in every aspect of classroom work
 - Hold students responsible for completion of work assigned with established standards for quality

Source: CREST: 1994:2-3

Clearly the characteristics of a good school in figure one above are grouped into two i.e. those related to the school itself and constitute school environment, and those that relates to the teachers, which underscores the important qualities of teachers in a good school. It is this school and teachers' qualities or characteristics that underpin parental preferences in the school choice school of thought.

OECD (2015) talks of "right" schools, which are referred to as one which build children's academic, social and emotional skills. According to OECD (2015), most parents care deeply about their children's education and would like them to attend the best school. Henry (2011) underscores this fact in his comment that "a child can be bright naturally but he or she needs to be in the right environment."

In a study reported by Burgess, Greaves, Vignoles and Wilson (2009), a majority of the parents (67.95%) cite proximity and/or ease travel as important reasons for their naming a school as their first preference on the local authority (LA) application form. Over 3/5th (62.90%) cites 'general good impression, just more than half (52.36%) cites school's characteristics and facilities, Just fewer than half (46.93%) often gives sibling attends the school as another important reason for school preference and interestingly less than one quarter (16%) of the parents say academic standards as the most important consideration. However, Allen, Burgess and McKenna (2014) report that parents are concerned about matters of quality such as academic performance and discipline.

Other aspects that parents care about in relation to their children schools include, distance from home to school, academic performance of schools and extracurricular activities which seem to influence parental preferences and therefore predict school choices at all grade levels (Harris and Larsen, 2015).

2.2 Placement of students in public secondary schools

In Kenya, students are placed into public secondary schools based on their KCPE performance (scores), preferences (choice) and district quotas (Ayodo and Too, 2010; Makori et al. 2015). Each national school has a district quota- a set number of students that will be offered a place from each district (Glewwe, Kremer and Moulin, 2002; Makori et al., 2015). If a students' national school are full, then he or she is admitted to a preferred county school (if those schools still have space) even if other national schools had space remaining (Ayodo and Too, 2010; Makori et al., 2015). However, if a student is unhappy with their placement they can apply directly to an alternative school and their admission is at the discretion of the head of the school, provided that there are available places (Ayodo and Too, 2010; Makori et al., 215). A place in a school is open to a direct applicant only if a student who was admitted to the school does not turn up at the start of the school year (Ayodo and Too, 2010; Makori et al., 2015).

Parents and students in Kenya highly value graduating from national schools as evidenced by the prices they are willing to pay and prestige associated with the graduates (Ayodo and Too, 2010; Makori et al., 2015). National schools have been recognised for having better facilities and resources, broader courses variety and performance in KCSE. Also national schools have higher quality peer groups (Onderi and Makori, 2014).

An understanding of public secondary schools in Kenya

Public schools in Kenya fall into four categories, namely, national, extra-county, county and district schools (Onderi and Makori, 2014; Makori et al., 2015). National schools are considered elite government schools and are the most prestigious secondary schools in the country (Ayodo and Too, 2010). They are comparable to elite schools in Singapore (Onderi and Makori, 2014; Makori et al., 2015). National public schools admit top primary school candidates from across the country and offer better facilities compared to other schools (Ayodo and Too, 2010). They also offer a wider of

broader variety of courses and provide a higher quality peer group (Ayodo and Too, 2010; Makori et al., 2015). Therefore national public schools differ significantly in terms of teachers, facilities and other resources (Glennerster, et al., 2011; Makori et al., 2015). Also national public schools perform far better in Kenya Certificate Secondary Education (KCSE) than other public secondary schools (Onderi and Makori, 2014). There are 105 national schools in the country, with a capacity of 17500 students (Onderi and Makori, 2014). For details regarding other categories of public secondary schools in Kenya (see Makori, Onyura, Cheboiwo, Yegon and Kandie, 2015). Also for details regarding similar categorisation public secondary schools in Malawi (see Makori et al., 2015).

3. Method

The study reported in this article was conducted to increase knowledge and understanding on parents' preference regarding the public secondary schools that their children joined in form in Kenya in 2015. The findings will contribute to building a knowledge base for understanding of the issues, and challenges schools preference and choices. The study adopted a quantitative research approach and employed questionnaire survey to collect data. The questionnaire format consisted of closed, open-ended and rating scale. This was necessary to diversify responses as well as reduce what Watson and Coombes (2009) as cited in Makori and Onderi (2013) call 'question fatigue'. The open-ended sections of the questionnaire offered respondents opportunity to make a comment, expand or clarify some information on their responses and thus help researchers and readers gain some insight in their perspective regarding form one selection process in a county in Kenya. Study respondents consisted of parents who had taken their children to form one 2015 and were purposively selected for the study. Their recruitment was varied. Some of the parents were known to the research assistants and therefore were recruited for the study. Others were recruited through snowball sampling i.e. through parents, relatives and friends who were known to the research assistants (Kumar, 2005; Cohen et al., 2011). Research assistants also used various occasions such as academic day and fundraising drive, among others to recruit the study respondents. During the recruitment process, respondents were explained the purpose of the study and its implications to them, how to complete questionnaires and were also assured of confidentiality and anonymity. The respondents gave verbal consent and shortly after they all given questionnaires. Data collection exercise lasted for five months (February to May, 2015). A total of 150 questionnaires were returned representing in a response rate of 83.3 %. Closed-ended items were processed and analysed using the statistical package for social sciences (SPSS) resulting in descriptive data, whereas open-ended data or comments were analysed into themes or categories and used to clarify or expand respective study findings reported in this article.

4. Results

4.1 Characteristics of the respondents

- Just over half (52.3%, n=150) of the respondents were females.
- Occupations of the participants (see table 1)

Table 1: Showing occupations of respondents

Occupation of respondents	%, n=150
Farmer	25%
Teacher	52.9%
Civil Servant	11.8%
Business persons	5.6%
Student	1.4%
Civil engineer	0.7%
Miner	0.7%
Total	100%

Just over half (54.9%) of the respondents were teachers and another one quarter (25%) were farmers. The rest (20.1%) comprised civil servants, business persons, civil engineer, miner and a student.

4.2 KCPE Marks scored and views about the selection process

Table 2: Showing marks scored at KCPE level

KCPE Marks scored	%, n=150
101- 200	0.7%
201- 300	32.7%
301- 400	65.3%
Over 401	1.3%
Total	100%

Just fewer than two-thirds of the students scored 301- 400 marks and another fewer than one third scored 201- 300 marks. Further analysis suggests that:

- 38% of the males scored 301- 400 marks compared to 27.3 % of females; 12% of the males scored 201- 300 marks compared to 21.6% of the females and only 2 females scored over 401 marks.

However:

- Just over half (53.7%, n=150) of the parents (strongly disagree or disagree) indicate that their children did not join the school of their choice or preference.
- Just over one quarter (27.9%, n=150) of the parents (strongly disagree or disagree) indicated that they were not happy with the school their child joined, because they joined a small school which was not of their choice and poor.

Some parents who were not pleased with the schools their children joined made the following comments which highlight some concerns such as: congested dormitories; lack of water; lack of facilities; lack of challenging learning environment; lack of academic reputation; school in remote area and not easily accessible; lack of motivation for students and the environment not conducive for learning.

- "According to her performance she deserved to be in a much better school." [Respondent 99]. The child scored 301- 400 marks and joined county school.
- "It does fit with my child's marks obtained." (Sic) [Respondent 17]. The child scored 301- 400 marks and joined a district.
- "Too poor because it does not have all the facilities." [Respondent141]. The child scored 301- 400 marks and joined a district school.
- "My child was aiming to join good school which she will come back with good grade and Join University." (Sic) [Respondent37]. The child scored 301-400 marks and joined a district school.
- "The school is poorly equipped and the boy may lack competition." (Respondent 44). The child scored 301- 400 marks and joined a district school.
- "Not happy Co3 my child had good marks and joined a district school." (Sic) [Respondent 79]. The child scored 301- 400 marks and joined a district school.
- "The child/I expected my child to join a school with a track record in academic excellence." (Sic) [Respondent 146]. The child scored 201-300 marks and joined a district school.
- "It is located in a remote area where it is not easily accessible and also the structures and the environment is not fit for learning." [Respondent 93]. The child scored 201-300 marks.
- "The child could have been admitted to the school his marks suited." (Sic) [Respondent 108]. The child scored 301- 400 marks and joined a district school.
- "She did not join a school of her choice." [Respondent 119]. The child scored 301- 400 marks and joined a district school.
- "The dormitories are congested, no water and also insufficient food. [Respondent 114] The child scored 301- 400 and joined a county school.
- "Because it was not the expectations of the child to join the school he was admitted." (Sic) [Respondent 104]. The child scored 301- 400 marks and joined county school.
- "This is because it really discourages those pupils who worked hard for their marks only to be given schools not of their choice as far as quality is concerned." (Sic) [Respondent 117]. The child scored 301-400 marks and joined a district school.
- "No facilities/learning materials; lazy teaching staff; poor methods of teaching and lack of motivation for

learners.” [Respondent 106]. The child scored 301-400 marks and joined a district school.

- “The location of the school is forested thus very cold for the student which more often feel sick and the administration take little concern to that making students uncomfortable.” (Sic) [Respondent 137]. The child scored 301- 400 and joined a county school.

Skimming through the comments above, it is evident that a majority of the children with 301- 400 marks joined district schools. Most of their parents expected these children to join national schools because of the marks they obtained at KCPE level. It is also clear from the parents’ comments above, that most parents preferred their children to join good schools and in this case national or extra-county schools.

4.3 The category of public school that the child joined for form one

Table 3: Showing the category of public secondary school that the child joined

Public school category that the child joined	%, n=150
National school	8.7%
County school	58.4%
District school	32.9%
Total	100%

Just over 90% of the students joined district or county school. Further analysis reveal that similar number of students joined public school; 84 % (n=150%) of them joined a medium size or large school; 87.2 % (n=150) were boarding schools and just over half (51.4%, n=150) were rural schools.

Table 4: Showing KCPE marks scored and the school the child joined

KCPE Marks Scored	Category of school the child joined		
	District school	County school	National School
101- 200	1(0.7%)	0(0%)	0(0%)
201- 300	26(17.3%)	21(14%)	1(0.7%)
301- 400	22(14.7%)	66(44 %)	10(6.7%)
Over 401	0(0%)	0(0%)	2(1.3%)
Total	48(32%)	87(58%)	13(8.7%)

- Just fewer than 20% of students with 301- 400 marks joined district school.
- The ratio of students with 301- 400: 201-300 marks that joined county school is 3:1.
- The ratio of students with 301-400:201-300 marks that joined national school is 10:1.

5. Discussion

This study set out to investigate parents’ views regarding the public secondary schools that their children joined. Evidences from the study show that a number of students who scored 301- 400 marks joined district public schools. Fewer than 10% of the children joined national schools. Slightly over 90 per cent joined county or district schools and just over half (51.4%) of the schools were rural based. Just over 10 per cent were small schools. Fewer than 30 per cent of the parents were not happy with the schools that their children joined.

When parents who were not happy with the schools that their children joined cited the following reasons:

- The schools were located in remote areas making accessibility difficult.
- The schools were small schools, with poor facilities and therefore not able to provide quality education.
- Schools poorly equipped and lacked motivation for students
- The child deserved a much better school than the one she or he joined.
- The child was aiming to join a good school to obtain a good grade and eventually join university.

The reasons cited reveal a certain degree of frustration among parents because many of them expected or preferred their children to join national schools which are endowed with good facilities, good teaching and learning environment, broader course variety and good quality peer group interactions compared to other public schools.

According to Ayodo and Too (2010) parents and students in Kenya highly value graduating from national schools because of the prestige associated with the graduates. Also the World Bank (2004) as cited in Ayodo and Too (2010), low quality placement can suppress enrolment and impede students progression and achievement.

Over the years, parents have sought best educational experience for their children, which are possible through good schools which could equip them with knowledge and skills, thus empowering them to face future life challenges.

It is evident from this study that parents prefer their children to join good schools, ones that are motivating, well equipped, easily accessible, offer challenging learning environment and with reputed academic records. However, in Kenya they lack a direct provision through which they can exercise their preferences. They can only exercise their preference through their children to choose good schools. So in this case parents have a limited school preference. And even so it is not guaranteed because students are selected to secondary schools based on their KCPE performance, preference and district quotas (Ayodo and Too, 2010). So it is the students' preference and that of parents that matters in choosing secondary schools in Kenya, unlike the UK and the USA where parents can exercise their preference through the school choice initiatives (West, Barham and Hind, 2009; OECD, 2015; Hastings et al., 2005). That is why in this article we argue that Kenyan parents are limited in terms of choosing secondary schools for their children. They may have a preference but opportunity to exercise that school choice directly.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

Evidence reveal that a significant number of parents were not pleased with the schools that their children joined citing issues like, the students had good marks and therefore deserved better schools than the schools they joined, the schools had poor facilities and insufficient teachers and some schools did not have good environment for teaching and learning. It is also evident that some students scored 301- 400 marks but were admitted in district schools. This suggests further that parents preferred their children to join good schools with reputable academic records, well equipped, motivating and conducive learning environment, among others. But this appears as a wishful thinking because in reality parents have no direct provision of exercising their school choice. They depend on their children to choose a good school. In the absence of such opportunity, it is important that the government improves the quality of the majority of the public secondary, especially county and district schools so as to minimise variation between such schools and national public secondary schools in the country. In that way district and county schools would become good schools offering challenging and conducive learning environment. The suggestion is that parent strengthens their indirect school preference by working closely with their children who are the only people who can make direct school preference choices. Working with them here refers to sharing information, discussing and encouraging them regarding the merits of good schools and working hard to attend or join such schools.

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