Factors Affecting School Choice: Observations from Nakhon Ratchasima Municipality

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Abstract

The purpose of this research was to study the factors influencing decision making for children to study in schools. A survey was distributed to school board members, principals, teachers, parents, and students (N = 364). Data were analysed by means of frequency, percentage, mean, standard deviation, and multiple regression analysis. The study indicated building and environment, teachers, reputation of the school, tuition fees, and relationships with the community influenced the decision of parents to send their children to a particular school, at a statistical significance level at or above .05. The most influential factor was building and environment. Teachers, school reputation, tuition fees were next in importance, and finally the relationships with the community. The correlated coefficient between these factors and the decision to send their children to a school was .92. These factors could explain 84.0% of the variance in deciding to send their children to a particular school.

Introduction

It is normal for parents to seek the best educational environment for their children. In Southeast Asia, studies have shown that parents consider the proximity of school location, school performance, and the medium of instruction as significant factors when choosing a school for their children (Ting & Lee, 2019). Thailand, on the other hand, presents an interesting case. Thai children's education may be affected by the parent with whom they stay. For instance, Jampaklay (2006) reported that there was less disruption to children's education when they were under the care of their mother. Another social phenomenon related to school choice in Thailand is the 'modified extended family,' where rural children are sent by their parents to urban areas for educational opportunities. While this promotes the well-being of the parents, the communication dynamics between parents and children changes considerably (Knodel & Saengtienchai, 2007). These observations, however, were made based on studies of the migratory movements of children away from their parents. To date, minimal studies have examined parental choice of schools within their area of residence, especially the choice involving local Thai schools (see Lampadan, 2008, for choice of international schools in Thailand). Hence, to contribute to our current understanding of Thai parents' choice of schools, this study examined relevant factors. This study was based on a sample taken in Nakhon Ratchasima Municipality—an area that faces challenges from the lack of trained teachers and learning facilities (Fry et al., 2018).

Literature Review
Education in Nakhon Ratchasima Municipality

Before discussing relevant factors that affect parents' choice of school for their children, some educational issues found in Nakhon Ratchasima Municipality need to be highlighted. Educational research in this area is quite limited, but growing. Educational quality in Nakhon Ratchasima is of particular concern. It has been reported that schools in the region do not have adequate educational support or materials due to a lack of funding. This issue is more severe in schools located in remote areas (Fry et al., 2018). School students at the secondary school level in North-eastern Thailand have also been found to report higher levels of academic stress, attributed to students' academic workloads and their preparation for national exams (Sripongwiwat et al., 2018). This may be linked to the retention of traditional approaches in classrooms, such as rote learning and teacher-centered learning (Tongpoon-Patanasorn, 2011). The lack of resources and teacher-centered approaches may also have

contributed to the generally low English proficiency among school students in the North-eastern provinces (Draper, 2012). Amidst these issues, there are also educational innovations worth noting, such as the promotion of a curriculum that recognizes the regional identity. Draper (2015) reported that the community from the Khon Kaen Municipality showed a positive attitude towards the revitalization of a local dialect. Moreover, the study reported that the local dialect is still used extensively in the school domain, despite standard Thai being the sole medium available in teaching and learning materials.

Factors Affecting Thai Parents' School Choice

As discussed in the introduction, there are various factors that may come into play when deciding on a school. In the context of Thailand, there have been several studies that have examined these factors. For instance, in a study by Aunsiri et al. (2018) indicated that school factors (building and environment, school climate), teacher factors (teacher ability, personality, morality and ethics, leadership), and parents (faith, involvement) were positively related to the decision making of parents (significance level of .01). In another study, Yaacob et al. (2014) found that parents, in deciding on an international school, emphasized the importance of the school curriculum, the environment, and the facilities of school. The academic performance of the school was ranked third, with the fourth factor considered being the qualification of teachers. This was also reflected in decisions on choosing a higher educational institution. For instance, Sankham and Hamra (2016), in their study of factors affecting student decisions to study at Asia-Pacific International University, found that significant service marketing mix factors were physical evidence (facilities), product (curriculum), process (service), pricing (tuition fees), and place (location).

Relevant Factors for School Choice

In this section, the researchers discuss six factors relevant to school choice. They are School Reputation, Teachers, Tuition Fees, Building and Environment, Travel, and Relationship with the Community.

School Reputation

School reputation may be formed based on the school's academic performance. Bosetti (2004) found that the reputation and exam results of schools are key features guiding parents' school choices. The choice may also be affected by values, beliefs, or even the principal heading the school. School reputation may also be defined by the services offered, such as access for students with special needs, transportation, or after-school care (Stein et al., 2011). There also are reports of parents who were unable to define what school reputation means (Fabian, 2012).

Teachers

Linked with school reputation, research has shown that good teachers are important factors associated with school choice. Bosetti (2004) found one of four reasons for choosing a school was the teachers' teaching style (47%), as this will impact students' academic performance (Fairlie, 2006). Furthermore, Nurahimah (2010) stated that teachers can increase or decrease students' efficacy.

Tuition Fees

Cost is an important factor to consider when choosing a school (Lang et al., 2009). For example, parents in Nairobi chose low-cost private schools for their children (Zuilkowski et al., 2018). Low-fee schools in low-income areas also have become increasingly common in parts of Sub-Saharan Africa (Oketch et al., 2010).

Building and Environment

The quality of school buildings is very important in creating an appropriate, attractive, and welcoming environment for teaching and learning. Head teachers, teachers, and parents should

participate in the upkeep of schools. Christopher (1991) believed that the school building design impacted positively on the educational process and students' achievement. Several studies have focused on building attributes of schools that may affect student achievement, which in turn influenced parents in their choice of a school (Earthman, 2004; Higgins et al., 2005).

Travel

It has been found that parents often choose a school because of its safe distance and access to transportation. The general preference is for nearby schools. Moreover, it may be highly preferred if children are able to commute to schools without transportation (Davison et al., 2008; Ting & Lee, 2019).

Relationship with the Community

Schools' engagement with the community is important, as the development of students' sense of identity is critical. In a study in Malaysia by Ting and Lee (2019), as well as in another in Thailand by Draper (2015), it was found that parents preferred schools that would help their children develop a positive affiliation with their immediate community. This preference became increasingly positive if the schools were capable of retaining the ethnic identity of the community by allowing the use of ethnic dialects or the teaching of cultural norms.

Study Context

Nakhon Ratchasima Municipality was chosen as it was considered to provide an interesting context. As discussed earlier, reports have indicated that schools in the North-eastern region face challenges due to the lack of facilities and qualified teachers. It is also an area where there is a distinct identity. Hence, plans have been created to improve the educational management of municipal schools. This plan covers the development of management systems, the system of teaching, human resource development and support, external evaluation, teaching 21st century skills, and learning foreign languages (English, Japanese, and Chinese).

Within the Nakhon Ratchasima Municipality, there are five schools that provide pre-primary, elementary, and secondary education. These Municipal School are: a) Burapha Wittayakorn Municipal School, b) Wat Samo Rai Municipal School, c) Yommarat Samakki Municipal School, d) Phoa Chum Municipal School, and e) Wat Pa Chitta Samakkhi. There are also other affiliated organizations such as the Office of Primary Educational Service Area, Office of Secondary Educational Service Area, Office of the Vocational Education Commission, and the Office of the Higher Education Commission that provide pre-primary, primary, and secondary education in the area of Nakhon Ratchasima Municipality. To enrol into any of these schools, parents need to submit a request.

Methodology and Methods

A quantitative approach was chosen as the main data collection method. The researchers attempted to collect responses from different stakeholders, such as school board members, principals, teachers, parents, and students. Purposive sampling was employed, with the numbers of respondents from different schools as outlined in Table 1.

Data were collected through a survey. The items included both positive and negative statements. The survey consisted of two main parts. The first part used closed-ended questions to collect information about the participants. The second part consisted of statements regarding factors affecting the parents' school choice for their children. The participants rated these statements according to a five-point Likert scale. These statements were validated with the Item Objective Congruency Index (IOC). Items with an IOC index higher than .50 were accepted and used in the questionnaire. The reliability of the factors investigated—school reputation, teachers, tuition fees, building and environment, travel, and relationship with the community—also were analysed by Cronbach's alpha, which showed confidence values of .98, .85, .87, .92, .90, .88, and .93, respectively.

Descriptive analysis was used for the survey data. Participant information was summarized with descriptive statistics such as raw frequencies and percentages. Factors affecting school choice, on the other hand, were first summarized using means and standard deviations. Then, other statistical analyses, such as Pearson's (r) correlation was used to examine independent variables with initial agreements not exceeding .80. Independent variables that showed a relationship at or in excess of .80 may be suspected of exhibiting multi-collinearity (Bryman & Cramer, 1997). Multi-collinearity is usually regarded as a problem, because it means that the regression coefficients may be unstable. This implies that they are likely to be subject to considerable variability from sample to sample. In any case, when two variables are very highly correlated, there is no real significance to treat them as separate entities. Furthermore, the relationship between each factor on the decision making of parents was analysed using multiple regression.

Table 1. Profile of Respondents

Profile		Frequency	Percentage
School:	Municipal School 1	133	36.5
	Municipal School 2	63	17.3
	Municipal School 3	65	17.9
	Municipal School 4	79	21.7
	Municipal School 5	24	6.6
	Total	364	100
Respondent:	School Board	4	1.1
	Principals	8	2.2
	Teachers	90	24.7
	Guardians	262	72.0
	Total	364	100
Sex:	Male	111	30.5
	Female	253	69.5
	Total	364	100
Age:	10-30 years	29	8.0
	31-60 years	326	89.6
	61-75 years	9	2.5
	Total	364	100
Education:	Primary	73	20.1
	Secondary	108	29.7
	Vocational Certificate	47	12.9
	Bachelor or above	136	37.4
	Total	364	100
Career:	Official	120	33.0
	Employee	141	38.7
	Private business	103	28.3
	Total	364	100

The majority of respondents were the guardians of students or employees from the Municipal School 1, female, between 31–60 years, and bachelor's degree holders or above (Table 1). Most of them were employees.

Findings

Factors affecting the decision to send children to schools in Nakhon Ratchasima Municipality are presented in Tables 2 to 5.

From Table 2 it can be seen that the decision to send children to school in Nakhon Ratchasima Municipality returned a high overall mean score (M = 4.52; maximum attainable value was 5.00). When considering all the items, it was found that every item was associated with high values. The highest mean was associated with "Parents considered the expenses, food, and services" (M = 4.57).

The lowest mean was recorded against "Parents considered the quality of the students, administrators and teachers" (M = 4.40).

Table 2. Mean and Standard Deviation of Factors Affecting Parents' School Choice

Items Considered by Parents	M	SD	Interpretation
Parents considered the quality of the students, administrators, and teachers	4.40	.49	High
Parents considered the expenses, food, and services	4.57	.50	High
Parents considered the traveling pattern between home and school	4.52	.50	High
Parents decided because of school advertisements	4.55	.50	High
Parents took into consideration the students' care, and the facilities of the school.	4.52	.50	High
Parents considered the work processes adopted by teachers	4.53	.50	High
Parents considered the facilities that helped create the school's image	4.52	.50	High
Average	4.52	.37	High

From Table 3, all factors monitored were given high consideration in the decision to send children to school in Nakhon Ratchasima Municipality. The highest mean was for "Teachers" (M = 4.18). The lowest mean was returned for the "Building and Environment" (M = 3.99).

Table 3. Mean and Standard Deviation of School Factors Considered by Parents

Items Related to the School	M	SD	Interpretation
School Reputation (X_1)	4.12	.72	High
Teachers (X_2)	4.18	.70	High
Tuition Fees (X_3)	4.07	.83	High
Building and Environment (X_4)	3.99	.72	High
Travel (X_5)	4.03	.72	High
Relationship with the Community (X_6)	4.06	.81	High
Average	4.07	.61	High

School choice for children by parents was positively related to school reputation, teachers, tuition fees, facilities and environment, travel, and community relations (Table 4). These six factors all returned a medium-high level of statistical significance (.01 level).

Table 4. The Correlation Coefficient between Factors Affecting School Choice and School Factors

Variables	X_1	X_2	X_3	X_4	X_5	X_6	X	Y
X_1	1	.76**	.46**	.59**	.56**	.60**	.80**	.78**
X_2		1	.50**	.61**	.55**	.56**	.81**	.81**
X_3			1	.60**	.58**	.61**	.78**	.64**
X_4				1	.69**	.69**	.85**	.80**
X_5					1	.64**	.82**	.67**
X_6						1	.84**	.71**
X							1	.89**

**p-value < .01

The multiple regression analysis is presented in Table 5. It shows that School Reputation (X_1), Teachers (X_2), Tuition Fees (X_3), Building and Environment (X_4), and Relationship with the community (X_6) had a common influence on the decision to send children to school in Nakhon Ratchasima Municipality, with a statistical significance at or above the level of .05. The most influential factors were the Building and Environment (X_4), followed by Teachers (X_2), School Reputation (X_1), Tuition Fees (X_3), and Relationship with the Community (X_6), respectively. The multiple correlation coefficient between these factors and the decision to send children to schools in Nakhon Ratchasima Municipality

was .92. These factors could explain the variance in the decision to send children to school in Nakhon Ratchasima Municipality which was 84.0%.

Table 5. Multiple Regression Step-wise Analysis on School Factors

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients (b)	Standardized Coefficients (β)	t	p
Constant	.02		0.22	.830
School Reputation (X_1)	.20	.23	6.45[**]	.000
Teachers (X_2)	.29	.31	9.02[**]	.000
Tuition Fees (X_3)	.09	.12	4.14[**]	.000
Building and Environment (X_4)	.29	.33	9.59[**]	.000
Travel (X_5)	.02	.02	0.72	.473
Relationship with the Community (X_6)	.06	.08	2.44[*]	.015

R = .92, R^2 = .84, p = .000; [*]p-value < .05 [**]p-value < .01

The regression analysis of results in Table 5 can be presented as follows: Decision to send children to school = .020 + .200 (School Reputation) + .287(Teachers) + .092 (Tuition Fees) + .292 (Building and Environment) + .063 (Relationship with the Community) (R = 0.92, R^2 = 0.84, p = .000).

Discussion

We consider the findings of this study interesting. First, it affirms the findings of Jampaklay (2006), who found that the presence or absence of a mother had a significant effect on children's education. In our study, a majority of the respondents were themselves female and guardians. It is probably that a large number of this sample consisted of mothers. Our survey may have been completed by mothers due to their role as decision-makers for their children's education. Second, our findings indicate that most of the respondents had at least an undergraduate degree. This is important as it has a bearing on children's school completion rate (Korinek & Punpuing, 2012). Third, it is interesting to note that expenses or paid services were significant factors that affected parental choice of school. This may be due to parental preference for more affordable schools, as most families in Nakhon Ratchasima and the broader North-eastern region, are in agricultural businesses (Moore & Donaldson, 2016; Shirai & Rambo, 2017). The lack of revenue from fee-paying students could also have an effect on schools' operational abilities, given that schools may be receiving minimal financial aid from official bodies. Fourth, while expenses seem to be an important factor, the respondents also had indicated that teachers play a crucial role in school choice. This finding appears debatable, especially when we consider the study of Fry et al. (2018), which reported that many teachers in the North-eastern region of Thailand never attended teacher education colleges, nor do they have teaching qualifications.

Next, through step-wise analysis, the building and environment of a school emerged as an influential factor. Given that students spend a large part of their day in schools, a safe and conducive environment should be created and maintained. Nonetheless, schools, students and their parents, and communities should remember that students should also spend quality time in their homes. A study by Pholphirul and Teimtad (2018) indicated homes should be supportive of students' academic progress and social skills in order to contribute to the nation's educational aspirations. Finally, this study noted that the relationship with the community was not as significant. This might warrant further investigation, given that a community can ensure the safety of schools, such as that seen in areas experiencing conflict in Thailand (Brooks, 2015). School involvement in community efforts also reflects a positive affinity towards the local ethnic identity of the region (Draper, 2015). If schools are not playing an active part in promoting or preserving local cultures or traditions, the community is at risk of losing its distinct identity. On the flip side, a community's perception towards the role of schools and education is also important. When a surrounding community is not supportive of education, the chances of school attrition among children becomes higher (Korinek & Punpuing, 2012).

Implications

Parents' Involvement in Schools

The municipality should establish good relationships with parents by participating in various community activities in which the parents live. For example, the school might allow the use of sports fields so as to become acquainted with parents. If the parents come to be resource speakers, the school can provide appropriate compensation. The municipality should develop a social network to make it easier for parents to access the school via Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Google Plus, and Instagram. However, it is quite difficult to encourage parents to get involved. First, parents are different in education, occupation, income, ethnicity, and religion. Second, parents also have an attitude that educational management is the duty of the school. Third, most parents are poor. They have to spend most of their time with their careers. These differences lead to difficulty in getting everyone involved. The municipality should build credibility by maintaining educational standards in order to strengthen parents' faith in the schools. Encouraging parents to have a knowledge and understanding of school policies and plans is the first thing that should be done.

School Physical Facilities and Environments

Most schools have enough buildings, but still lack shaded areas. Schools should plant trees for shade and a vegetable garden. In addition to being ornamental plants, vegetables can also be cooked as food. Students should be involved in the care and benefit thereof. This activity should be done after school because it will truly benefit the family or community of students.

Community Engagement

Project-based learning is designed for students to collect information about the health of their family members and neighbours. Students can learn health care methods, first aid, and epidemic prevention under the guidance of teacher advisors. The school should operate in collaboration with local administrative organizations in regards to budgetary support and environmental management that is conducive to child health. Schools already work with parents to control the intake of salty and sweet foods by students, but also might encourage them to eat more fruits and vegetables. Exercise might be encouraged in free time to benefit and improve health. Schools can contribute to this process, as they are well-equipped with facilities, and equipment, so exercising together will improve the health of the community.

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