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Factors Affecting School Choice Decision Among Iranian Parents: A Qualitative Study

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ABSTRACT

School choice is a high-involvement process in which parents need to consider numerous factors when making this decision. However, little is known about the factors affecting school choice among Iranian parents. The purpose of this study is to investigate the factors affecting the school choice process among Iranian parents. Because the previous literature does not adequately investigate such topic among Iranian families. The qualitative approach, using consensual qualitative research (CQR), was utilized. For this study, 29 parents were recruited. A semi-structured interview was conducted. Through data analysis, three domains emerged: 1- school physical environment, 2- school educational quality, and 3- school atmosphere. Additionally, nineteen categories emerged, which were categorized into the three mentioned categories. Findings are explained from the Iranian cultural perspective, and implications for educators and policymakers are discussed.

Keywords: School choice, Qualitative study, Iranian parents, CQR.

Introduction

The majority of parents want to provide their children with the best possible educational opportunities. School choice is a high-involvement process in which parents need to consider numerous factors when making this decision. Contrary to those school choice opponents who

argue that low-income and especially black families don't know how to make good choices for their children, results of a research conducted by Bedrick (2013) showed that 93% of low-income parents, single parents, African-American parents, and parents with less than a college education are willing and able to be informed as active education consumers on behalf of their children. The participants in this study admitted they spend a considerable amount of time making school choice decision, by finding information about different schools (e.g. - taking a tour, consulting friends, or attending an informational meeting). Besides, parents tend to make changes when they are unconvinced about the compatibility and quality of their children's school (Bosetti, 2004; Burgess, Greaves, Vignoles, & Wilson, 2011). In other words, parents tend to act in the best interest of their children, and their decision to invest in children in the form of education depends on several cultural, social, and economic factors.

Considering the complex process of school choice for Iranian parents, the purpose of this study is to investigate the factors affecting the school choice process among Iranian parents. Using a semi-structured interview, we utilized the qualitative approach to answer the following questions:

- What are the main factors affecting the school choice process among Iranian parents?
- How do Iranian parents obtain the information for their decision?
- Who is the person responsible for making a school-related decision in Iranian families?

School Choice

School choice is the process of selecting a school from the available options; (Burgess et al., 2011; Ibrahim, Osman, & Bachok, 2014). Boselovic (2015) claims that school choice options need to be unique; otherwise, parents might just select the nearest school to their home without evaluating school characteristics. To put it differently, school choice is a parental responsibility and based on their decisions, which has been made according to the information gathered on the options available. It should also be noted that current studies of school choice also tend to overlook the role of children in school-choice decisions.

For some families, like immigrant families, children act as translators and cultural brokers for their parents and therefore, they have an active role in the school choice. In a study by Andrabi, Das, Khwaja, Vishwanath, and Zajonc (2007), the distance to school was noted to remain a significant factor in parents' school choice. In a study conducted on 812 students in three rural districts of Punjab, 34% of students lived at a walking distance of 5 to 15 minutes while 40 % lived at a distance of 5 minutes or less. The study found that private schools in rural Pakistan were generally clustered around the main village settlements, while public schools were primarily based in the peripheral areas. It was a logical response for distance-conscious parents to choose nearby private schools rather than far-away public schools, considering this clustering of private and public schools in the education market (Andrabi et al., 2007).

Studies show that there is also a social class variation among parents in school choice practice. Leroux (2015) states that parents with low socioeconomic status are less likely to make a choice and are also less likely to think of school performance as an essential criterion for the school selection. It has also been established that Parents with higher qualifications and socioeconomic status actively engage in making school-related decisions, including school choice, and consider school academic performance in the selection process (Burgess, Greaves, Vignoles & Wilson, 2015).

It has been established that the social network and socioeconomic status of the families are profoundly influential in determining school choice. However, the social network of low-economic status families might be limited. This point of view may result in considering all schools in the neighborhood being similar rather than different (Rhodes & DeLuca, 2014; Schneider, Schiller, & Coleman, 1996). Families gain the needed information about the school choice process through different methods. This method of gathering information affects the decision outcomes. For example, studies reveal that, compared to parents who gain information on their own, parents who are given detailed information about school quality are more likely to select higher-achieving schools (Hastings & Weinstein, 2008; Kisida & Wolf, 2010). In a systematic review of the related literature, Rohde et al. (2019) reported that in about 50% of the studies, they investigated the

school academic quality as the only reason for school choice shared by participants in different countries and regions. Another critical factor, which parents reported as an essential determinant of school choice, is school safety and discipline (Henig, 2009; Rhodes & DeLuca, 2014). Parents define safety and discipline differently; therefore, their opinions and decision outcome may differ accordingly (Lee & Holland, 1993). It could be concluded that school choice is influenced by several factors, including school academic quality, tuition fee, religious perspectives, reputation and recommendation, school leadership, class size, and school facilities, among many other factors (Rohde et al., 2019).

School Choice among Iranian parents

Education in Iran is divided into two main levels, including primary education and higher education. After the most recent reform in the Iranian educational system in 2013, students are supposed to attend six years of primary level, which is mandatory, followed by three years of lower and three years of higher secondary level. Education in Iran is offered both by the public as well as the private sectors. Based on official reports, almost 85 percents of the students attend public schools; being free of cost, whereas in private schools, the parents have to pay for, which includes high tuition fee. *Shahed* schools and *NemunehMardumi* are additionally offered by the state, in which students are asked to take part in a competitive admission exam. Shahed school, in addition, only register students with the highest performance in the previous levels. Shahed Schools were initially developed for the families of the soldiers martyred in Iran-Iraq war (Shahed means Martyr in Farsi). Public schools are available in almost all neighbourhoods and students are asked to register in the nearest public school available, though this is also possible for parents to choose a different school than the one they have been originally assigned to. This is the same process for being accepted at the universities, as students need to take part in a competitive exam called *Konkur* so that they are able to choose their university major. Based on official documents, majority of students accepted at Konkur were students of private sectors, which is probably because of number of reasons (e.g., special courses, number of students in each class, extracurricular activities, etc).

All schools and universities are required to promote Islamic values,

though minorities (such as Christian) can attend school specifically developed for them. Some school, which are called Quran-Based schools, provide additional services based on Islam and are available in all educational levels. This is in addition to Howza, where Shi'a Muslim clerics are educated. In Iranian educational system, religion is viewed as an inseparable part of human growth (i.e., socially, psychologically and culturally) and therefore, secular education does not exist.

In this educational system, parents can choose between schools based on different factors. Though parents have different choices in terms of school for their children, no prior study has investigated the affecting factors involved in the process of school choice. Knowing factors affecting school choice can help educators, policy makers and researchers develop evidence-based interventions and managerial decisions with the aim of improving schools according to parents interests. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to investigate factors affecting school choice decision among Iranian parents through a qualitative study.

Methodology

Participants: 29 Iranian parents (9 male and 20 female) of elementary school children (6-7 years) were selected for this study. Parents were interviewed one by one. Participants were from Arak city, Iran and Farsi was their original language and predominantly spoke Farsi at home (One parent mentioned they spoke Turkish at home). Children of these parents attended nine schools (i.e., four public schools and five private schools). Parents' mean age was 29.1 years. Approximately 13.79% reported high school or less than high school degree, 31.03% had a Diploma, 51.72% had B.A., and 3.44% of participants had M.A. Participants had an average of 1.33 children per household (range: 2 - 3). The average number of children in all Iran (including rural and urban) is reported as 2.1. Considering the fact that the participants were only selected from urban areas, this number of children was expected by the researchers. Regarding children's gender, 18 students were boys, 11 were girls. 17 students attended public schools, while 12 attended private schools (see table 1). In addition, table 2 summarizes individual characteristics of the participating parents.

Table 1.*Sociodemographic characteristics of the participating parents (n = 29).*

Characteristics	Mean	%
Age	29.10	
Parents' gender		
Male	9	31.03
Female	20	68.96
Number of Children		
One	21	72.41
Two	7	24.13
Three	1	10.34
Education Level		
High school or less	4	13.79
General Education Diploma	9	31.03
B.A.	15	51.72
M.A.	1	3.44
Types of School		
Public school	17	58.62
Private School	12	41.37

Table 2.*Demographic information of each participating parent (n = 29)*

#	Gender	Age	Child's gender	Type of school	Education
1	Female	26	Male	Public	2
2	Female	30	Male	Public	2
3	Female	32	Female	Private	3
4	Male	35	Male	Private	3
5	female	24	Female	Public	1
6	Female	27	Male	Private	3
7	Male	26	Male	Private	2
8	Female	27	Male	Private	3

Cont. Table 2.*Demographic information of each participating parent (n = 29)*

#	Gender	Age	Child's gender	Type of school	Education
9	Female	27	Female	Public	2
10	Female	26	Male	Private	3
11	Female	29	Female	Public	1
12	Male	33	Male	Public	3
13	Male	31	Male	Public	2
14	Male	28	Female	Public	3
15	Male	28	Male	Private	3
16	Male	27	Female	Private	3
17	Female	30	Male	Public	3
18	Female	31	Female	Public	2
19	Female	33	Male	Public	3
20	Female	32	Female	Private	3
21	Female	33	Female	Public	2
22	Female	35	Male	Public	1
23	Female	27	Female	Public	2
24	Female	28	Female	Private	3
25	Female	29	Female	Public	2
26	Female	28	Male	Public	1
27	Female	28	Male	Private	3
28	Male	27	Male	Private	4
29	Male	27	Male	Public	3

Note: 1 = High school or less, 2 = General Education Diploma, 3 = B.A. & 4 = M.A.
 Child's gender refers to the child under study.

Procedure

After reviewing related literature on the school choice process among parents of elementary school students, interview questions were developed. These parents were selected through their child's school and they

were all from Arak city, Iran. Each parent was interviewed individually. Each question included a core theme and several open-ended questions designed to investigate different aspects of the school choice process. As an example, parents were asked the following questions: "please tell me on what basis you have chosen this school? What process have you gone through to make such decision? What factors did you take into account to make your decision? Who is the person in charge of making this decision at your home?". It is worth noting that rapport building skills was followed throughout the interviews. This study employs a qualitative approach framework to collect and analyze the data. Qualitative approach is a research methodology in which we are able to understand and explain the meaning that participants contribute to the focus of the study (Trotter II, 2012). Parents were recruited through their children's school. Because of the particular characteristics of the population, we employed a purposeful and convenient sampling. The rationale behind using convenient sampling was that it allows the researcher to approach and select participants who are able to provide the information to the research questions. In addition, flyers, posters, and online sampling in different social media were utilized to recruit the participants. Initially, we explained the logistics of the study, and interested parents were asked to complete an informed consent form prior to the interview. Twenty-nine parents agreed to take part (female=20) and were asked the interview questions, and all interviews were recorded using a voice recorder for future analysis. Participants were asked to complete an informed consent form prior to the study.

Because of the unique characteristics of the population studied in this research, and the lack of studies in the review of the literature, qualitative research was an adequate tool to address the research questions. After investigating several qualitative methods (e.g., grounded theory and phenomenology), consensual qualitative research (CQR) was selected as the preferred methodology for investigation factors affecting school choice among Iranian parents. Interviews were administered to all participants, and to maintain the semi-structured interview format, we asked follow-up questions if needed. To have wider understanding of the school choice decision making, available peer-reviewed papers and written materials (including English and Persian) were investigated. A total number of 9 journal articles were identified, which were closely related to the topic of

the qualitative study. The semi-structured questions were developed prior to the study and were included in a manual prior to the study. Each interview took about 30 to 45 minutes to complete, and all interviews were recorded. Several procedures were also taken to strengthen the fidelity of the research. For example, consensus meetings, data saturation, dependability audits, and member checking were utilized at various stages of the data analysis to ensure the fidelity and trustworthiness of the data analysis. In addition, as suggested by Hill et al. (2005), team members were asked to discuss their expectations and biases with each other during all phases of data collection and data analysis. After the administration of the interview questions, the initial handwritten draft was given to the participants to review and confirm. Each participant was provided with a book as compensation for their participation. After each meeting, the interviews were assigned identification numbers and transcribed word-by-word for future analysis. Participants' identity was known only to the researchers of the study.

Data analysis

Researchers used the method introduced by Hill et al. (2005), which is also known as CQR. It is essential to use a qualitative method to improve our understanding of parents' experiences at schools and educational settings. It is an ideal method of data collection for in-depth studies, where the concept has not been previously studied. It is suitable for phenomenological studies as it reduces the coders' bias and subjectivity. CQR, which is a rigorous qualitative research methodology, was initially influenced by grounded theory, comprehensive process analysis (CPA), and the phenomenology approach (Hill, Thompson, & Williams, 1997) and emphasized the consensual data analysis. CQR recommends that to improve decision making quality, it is vital to improving consensus among the judges. Therefore, the researchers are encouraged to obtain multiple perspectives and reach consensus. In CQR, researchers regard participants as experts in the field and focus on gathering a rich description of the experience, rather than a numeral representation of the event. The purpose of this method is not to develop a new method but to describe a phenomenon that has not been studied before. This method uses a manual to code interviews and allows objectivity among judges. In addition, the purpose of the CQR is

not to introduce a single core category, followed by a hierarchical structure. As it is recommended by Hill et al. (1997) before and after the data collection and analysis process, the research team discussed their expectations and potential bias of the study. After a group discussion about the expectations, team members agreed to set aside their expectations and analysed the data free from subjectivity and bias.

Prior to carrying out the study, team members were required to read about CQR and related literature. To supplement the training, team members were provided with examples of studies in which CQR was utilized as the main research methodology. According to the CQR, in the initial phase of the study called cross-analysis, researchers need to identify themes that were included in more than 50 percent of the participants. Initially, all data were grouped into similar and meaningful themes. Then, the group worked together to create a consensus version of domains. Each category might include one or more subcategories. Each interview was investigated independently by all researchers, and core ideas were extracted. Initially, the research team assign themes of data to domains and then develop abstracts within domains that were developed based on the extracted themes. Hill et al. (1997) recommend that in identifying core ideas, it is necessary to capture the theme and essence of what the participants mentioned the domain in a few words. These core ideas were then combined into abstracts, which is defined as the collection of core themes. The auditor of the study was a counselor with 10 years of experience and had her doctorate in counseling. Her concerns were addressed in group session. Research team members brought an understanding of school choice. This understanding was based on different demographical information (i.e., social class, type of school, age and gender).

To further characterize the occurrence frequency of the categories, Hill et al. (1997) argued that "general" results were valid for all cases, "typical" results were valid for at least half of the cases, and "variant" results were valid for at least two or three but less than half of the cases. We also check with the group to ensure the cross-analysis was valid. Finally, to ensure that all domains, core themes, and subcategories have been identified, all researchers conducted the final check.

Findings

After consensus meeting and checking the stability of the data, the analysis of the interviews using CQR shows that factors affecting school

choice among parents could be categorized into three domains, including 1- school physical environment, 2- school educational quality, and 3- school atmosphere. The school physical environment domain includes: Cleanliness, School neighborhood, Use of natural elements in the school environment, School exterior design, and Distance to school/availability of transportation. The second domain includes the school educational quality, encompasses the following categories: extra-curricular activities, use of up to date technology, Teachers' quality, discipline and leadership, and School Previous educational Achievement. The third and the last domain, school atmosphere, includes the following categories: Religion-based Curriculum, Prohibition of Corporal Punishment, Knowing Someone at School, Considering Personal Growth, Out of School Activities, Ethnic Diversity and Cultural Diversity, Tuition Fee, Good Parent-Teachers Relationship and Providing Healthy Foods. An overview of the domains, categories, and their frequencies are provided in table 3. Please note that themes are organized by the most common responses to the least common within each category.

Table 3.

Domain, categories, and Frequencies of factors affecting school choice process (n = 29)

Domain / Categories	Frequency	Number	%
1. Schools' physical environment			
a) Distance to school/transportation	General	28	96.55
b) School's neighborhood	Typical	22	75.86
c) Cleanliness	Typical	17	58.62
d) Exterior design	Variant	4	13.79
e) natural elements	Variant	2	6.89
2. Schools' educational quality			
a) Teachers quality	General	29	100
b) Previous Educational Achievement	Typical	22	75.86
c) Discipline and leadership	General	21	72.41
d) extra curriculum program	Typical	16	55.17
e) use of up to date technology	Variant	5	17.24

Cont. Table 3.

Domain, categories, and Frequencies of factors affecting school choice process (n = 29)

Domain / Categories	Frequency	Number	%
3. School Atmosphere			
a) out of school activities	typical	27	93.10
b) Tuition	General	19	65.51
c) knowing someone at school	Typical	16	55.17
d) Good parent-teachers relationship	Typical	16	55.17
e) religious-based curriculum	Variant	9	31.03
f) Providing healthy foods	Variant	8	27.58
g) Ethnic and cultural diversity	Variant	6	20.68
h) prohibition of corporal punishment	Variant	3	10.34
i) considering personal growth	Variant	1	3.44

Note: Number = number of participants who mentioned a category

School Physical Environment: The analysis of the interview revealed that participants mentioned several factors related to the school physical environment. This domain included the following: Distance to school/availability of transportation, School neighborhood, Cleanliness, Use of natural elements in the school environment, and Appearance.

Distance to School/Availability of Transportation: Most participants mentioned distance from school as an important factor affecting their school choice decision ($n = 28$). Participant 16 indicated that "we had to choose the current school because it was close to our home." Participant 17 also indicated that "where we live the school are not of high quality. We were worried about how to get her to school. School principal promised to provide a school bus for a fair price."

School Neighborhood: Most participants ($n = 22$), especially those participants who belonged to the low- and middle-socioeconomic class, mentioned that school neighborhood was an important factor when deciding for the right school. Participant 29 indicated that "There was

another school near our home, maybe 5 minutes walking time; but we knew the neighborhood and I was worried about how my son would walk to school every day".

Cleanliness: Over half of the participants ($n=17$) mentioned they considered cleanliness of the school when making school choice decisions. Parent number 9 indicated that "I have seen cases that children are sick because of other classmates or school settings. A good school needs to be cleaned regularly".

Use of Natural Elements in the School Environment: This factor was only mentioned twice in all interviews ($n=2$). Participant number 8 indicated that "I used the current school because it used natural elements, trees, flowers, and beautiful playground. I want my child to be in touched with natural elements, not in a cage for 6 hours a day".

School Exterior Design: Four parents indicated that they took the exterior design of the school into account when choosing their children's school ($n=4$). Participant 28 shared, "they called schools the second home of the children. It needs to be clean and beautiful. We grown-up are the same. We prefer beautiful places to old, ugly places."

School Educational Quality: During interviews, participants commonly mentioned school educational quality as a critical factor affecting their decision-making process, which included extra-curricular programs, use of up to date technology, Teachers quality, discipline and leadership, and School Previous educational Achievement.

Teachers' Quality (Teachers' employment status): All participants indicated that teachers' quality is an important issue that they consider when choosing the right school ($n=29$). Participants stated how important it was for them to check the quality and educational background of the teachers before enrolling their children. Participant 5 describes the first-grade teacher of elementary school as the "foundation" of all education and her role as "immensely important." Participant 10 also indicated that "some schools utilize retired teachers. Principals say that is because they don't have enough teachers available. I know they are experienced, but I prefer someone who is younger and can relate better with children".

School Previous Educational Achievement: Most parents mentioned how they took previous educational achievement into account when making school choice decisions ($n=22$). Participant 22 mentioned, "I

was curious to know more about the school. So, I checked online, and I saw the different achievements of this school. The quality of a school is determined by the number of students accepted in *Nemuneh* schools". Participant 24 stated, "I have been investigating how school were doing during the past few year. It is important to have a school which is competent".

Discipline and Leadership: Most participants mentioned the discipline and leadership of the school as one of the determinants of their school choice ($n=21$). Participant's 6 response best reflects this category, "since I talked to the principal, I knew she could manage the school. If there is a good leader, a good manager in a school, everything will be done following order and discipline".

Extra Curricular Activities: More than half of the parents mentioned extra-curriculum programs as important in their school choice decision-making process ($n=16$). Categories mentioned under this theme include second language classes (which is not mandatory until middle school), swimming pools, art classes, and education, and sports facilities. Participant 5 shared that, "When we were young we did not have access to swimming pool, art classes, music, and so on. I checked with different friends and found that [*the name of the school*] hired an expert in painting as the art teacher." Participant number 24 also stated, "I have been investigating the lessons at school, I don't think they are enough for future generations. Therefore, one of my main concerns was to have a school in which extra-lessons are taught".

Use of up- to -date Technology: Using technologies and new methods of teaching also led the parents to choose some schools over others ($n=5$). Participant 5, for instance, while holding up her cellphone, indicated that "this [the mobile phone & technology] is the world now. They need to know how to work with it to survive in the future". Also, participants 15 mentioned that "nowadays, teachers need to change their strategies of teaching. It is very important to show children different lessons, not to tell them and ask them to read from the book. Teachers have to use computers, laptops, and technologies".

School Atmosphere: Participants mentioned that their decision about their children's school was affected by other categories, which could be best described as the school atmosphere. This domain includes *Religion- Based Curriculum, Prohibition of Corporal Punishment, Know-*

ing Someone at School, Considering Personal Growth, Out of School Activities, Ethnic and Cultural Diversity, Tuition Fee, Good Parent-Teacher Relationships, and Providing Healthy Foods.

Out of School Activities: A common category amongst participants was the availability of out of school activities ($n = 27$). Participant 12 describe out of school activities as a "necessity" and indicated that "children need to be outside, they need to see the society, go to park... there are in school to both learn and enjoy".

Tuition: School tuition was another category found in most interviews ($n = 19$). Participant 13 noted that "I know they might be other better schools, but we were not able to enroll our child there. It is difficult to pay almost two months' salary only for my daughters' school. That is why we decided to enrolled her in a public school".

Religion-Based Curriculum: Out of 29 participants, nine participants mentioned how they took the religious curriculum of the school into account ($n = 9$). Participant 4 indicated that "though I know religion teaching is an obligatory part of the school curriculum, I want my children to grow-up on religious perspectives."

Prohibition of Corporal Punishment: Three participants described how they were worried about the use of corporal punishment and how they asked the principal of the school if they use corporal punishment at school ($n = 3$). Participants 7 indicated that "before choosing this school, I talked to the principal of the school about punishment. I told him I had never punished my son before, never hit him. I believe what corporal punishment does it to make the children hate school and education. I don't want that".

Knowing Someone at School (personnel or other students): Sixteen participants mentioned they choose the current school as they knew someone from the school personnel or a student who attended the same school ($n = 16$). Participant number 23 mentioned, "I know the fourth-grade teacher. It is a relief to know someone at school". In addition, participant 9 noted, "we have a neighbor who has a child the same age as ours. She goes to the same school. They are classmate know. They help each other and go to school together".

Good Parent-Teacher Relationship: A typical number of parents ($n = 16$) mentioned that they consider the excellent parent-teacher relationship a determining factor in school choice. Parent 14 mentioned,

"I would love to know how the class is managed, what the goals are and how I can help my child be better. Some teachers are even rude when we want to ask a question about how our children are doing at school".

Personal Growth: Though this category was rarely mentioned in the interviews ($n=1$), it is given under the domain school atmosphere. Participant 5 noted that "it is important for a good school to focus on individual characteristics of a child. There is a saying which says if in a class you expect a fish to run, she will be the lazy and stupid student. Schools need to focus on the personal growth of the children. This is the point that I had in mind before choosing the current school".

Providing Healthy Foods: A variant number of participants also mentioned that healthy food was an essential factor in choosing schools ($n=8$). Participant 20 indicated that "it is important for the school to sell healthy foods. I pack her healthy foods, fruits, and other healthy snacks, but children like to buy things at school too".

Ethnic and Cultural Diversity: Six parents mentioned they regard cultural diversity as an important factor in a good school ($n=6$). Participant 11 indicated that "school is a small-scale society. You can find different people in society, some of whom may not be so kind to you. I want my son to grow up in a school that includes students from different walks of life".

Person in Charge of Decision Taking: Though most parents mentioned that deciding for their children's educational opportunity was a shared decision, they indicated that the research and the final decision were basically made with the mother. Considering data collection for the school choice, almost all participants mentioned how they checked with the Educational department of the district or asked the parents of the students, who already enrolled in the school. Five parents also mentioned that they checked online databases and forums and checked the educational background of the teachers and instructors.

Discussion

This is the first study investigating factors affecting school choice decision among Iranian parents. To gather and analyze the data, this study utilized a qualitative method (i.e., CQR). After the analysis of the data, three main domains emerged, including 1) school physical

environment, 2) school educational quality, and 3) school atmosphere. The school physical environment domain included Cleanliness, School's neighborhood, Use of natural elements in the school environment, Exterior Design, and Distance to school/availability of transportation. The second domain, the school's educational quality, encompasses the following categories: extra-curricular activities, use of up to date technology, Teachers' quality, discipline and leadership, and School Previous Educational Achievement. The third and the last domain, School Atmosphere, included the following categories: Religion-based curriculum, the prohibition of corporal punishment, knowing someone at school, considering personal growth, out of school activities, Ethnic Diversity and cultural diversity, Tuition, Good parent-teachers relationship and providing healthy foods. The findings of this research are consistent with the findings reported by (Asanjarani & Asgari, 2020; Berends, Cannata, & Goldring, 2011; Burgess et al., 2011, 2015; Chan & Yeung, 2019; Hastings & Weinstein, 2008; Holme, 2002; Kisida & Wolf, 2010; Merga & Sofamo, 2020; Rohde et al., 2019; Schneider et al., 1996; Siah, Christina Ong, Tan, Sim, & Xian Thoo, 2018).

Previous studies based on parent interview and survey showed that parents engage in a complex, dynamic, and multistep process of choosing a school for their child (Stein, Goldring, & Cravens, 2010). As Goyette (2014) suggests, school choices are interrelated and dependent on family resources, such as access to transportation and childcare or reliance on transportation and relatives. In terms of ethnic diversity, Persians are Iran's largest ethnic group, but nearly a dozen other ethnicities represent well over a third of the 79 million population. The largest ethnic groups, which are major factors in Iranian politics, are Azeris, Kurds, Arabs, Baluchis, and Lors. Others include Turkomen, Qashqai, Mazandarani, Talysh and Gilaki. Solidarity is encourage and valued in Iranian society. Many parents also value this virtue and even consider ethnic diversity as an important factor in their school-choice process.

Studies, which are primarily based on interviewing parents, indicate that parents regard school choice decision as a dynamic, complex, and multi-step process. Berends et al. (2011) suggest that this interrelated decision is based on several factors, like access to transportation and financial resources. The importance of financial resources has been

emphasized in previous studies (e.g., Siah et al. (2018)). This category was, also, considered by the majority of our participants (i.e., tuition fee). In prior research, it has also been established that socioeconomic status (SES) determines the school choice process. Earlier studies suggest that families with lower socioeconomic status have limited opinions of school choice (Rhodes & DeLuca, 2014), which is fundamentally influenced by their limited financial resources. In this study, it has been demonstrated that housing decisions represent the first decision that parents make, and the school decisions follow.

Regarding how parents make school choice decisions, some studies (e.g., Holme, 2002; Neild, 2005; Schneider et al., 1996) believe that parents highly rely on their social network in making school choice decisions. According to Bishop (2009), parents tend to rely on these social networks and consult with other members of the same social network when choosing between options. These networks, their opinions, and this exchange of information are highly valued (Bell, 2009).

This study showed that parents considered the distance between home and school as an important factor in choosing a school, though some studies suggest that this factor might differ between low- and high-income families. In a longitudinal study conducted by Rhodes and DeLuca (2014), it has been reported that as low-income family life is usually abrupt by moving, parents are more concerned about housing than school. That is to say, for low-income families, there is a limited number of options in terms of housing, transportation, and school choice (Rhodes & DeLuca, 2014). For these families, choosing a school that demands transportation because of distance is a remarkable barrier to school choice decisions. The case is different for high-income families, who are able to choose schools farther from their house based on their available resources (Lareau, 2014).

Conclusion and implications

This study explores parental reasons for primary school choice, as well as, the decision-making and social influences on school choice. The study demonstrated the universality of parental school choice evaluations, as current findings are consistent with studies conducted in countries other than Iran. These findings are consistent with the literature, where parental decision is a hidden factor in school choi-

ce. This study also showed that school choice for Iranian parents includes other issues that have not been mentioned in other cultures and studies. One of these exciting findings is the prohibition of corporal punishment. Though the use of corporal punishment is not frequently practiced, parents are now more concerned about punishing children than before. Three participating parents mentioned how they talked to the principals of the school about the use of corporal punishment before enrolling their children. This is an exciting point as previous studies, such as Oveisi et al. (2010) indicate that 80% of the Iranian parents in Quazvin city, used CP to bring up their children, 70% did not know the meaning, and about 50% did not know the complications of CP. This theme was frequently noticed in parents from high social class (middle- and upper- income families), though previous studies indicate that there is no significances or differences between CP experiences, income levels, and race (Weiss, 2016).

Another culture-specific finding of this study is how nine parents mentioned the importance of religion-based curriculum and teaching at school. Iranian educational system is based on Islamic thoughts and teachings. Though it is obligatory in all educational level to read about religious teachings, and it is even one of the main subjects on Konkur (i.e., university entrance exam), many parents still find the content insufficient and therefore, look for schools in which it is religion-based in both content and practice. The reason parents tend to choose religious school is that they think the conventional curriculum does not sufficiently focus on Islamic teachings and therefore, they choose more Islamic-based school. In addition, Islam is an integral part of Iranian society and any different orientation by western culture is frowned upon. Religious parents, who consider Islamic Doctrine found in Holy Qur'an the pathway to morality and virtue, are even willing to pay tuition fee for extra curricular activities found in private sectors.

The use of natural elements in school decoration was another specific finding of the current study. This is primarily because many schools lack playgrounds because of the area of the school and financial limitations. A mother of two explained how she had chosen the current school primarily because of the natural elements in the decoration and the playground of the schoolyard. She described another school which

was located in the neighborhood as "a cage" in which children are "confined." This is basically true, as children spend at least 6 hours of their study at school settings.

Limitations and Future Recommendations

Like all studies, this research has its own limitations. For the purpose of this study, we used convenient sampling to recruit 29 parents. The sampling method and the limited number of participants might impose some limitations to generalizing the study findings. Different methods were used to ensure the representativeness of the sample (e.g., recruiting parents from both public and private school, recruiting both fathers and mothers and recruiting parents from different areas and regions). Another limitation of all qualitative studies is the possibility of bias. All members of the research team were qualified counselors and educated in the field of psychology. During data collection and analysis, the trustworthiness of the data collection and analysis was ensured through various methods, including consensus meetings, dependability audits, and member checking. Constant checking of data, domains, and categories limited the potential for bias. Future studies should include a more powerful sample size, recruiting parents based on random selection, and parents from different cities. It is also significant to note that this study does not include minorities, such as different ethnic or religious groups. We recommend that future studies focus on minorities and how they might differ in terms of school choice preferences.

Understanding factors affecting school choice among Iranian parents can help educators and policymakers to understand the changing demands of the parents and prepare future delivery of educational services, accordingly. Many of the participating parents indicated that they are willing to pay tuition fee for extracurricular activities in private sector (i.e., facilities, second language courses, number of students, quality of the teachers). Though the Iranian government provides free educational opportunities for all Iranian and immigrants (e.g., Afghan Immigrants), we see that the educational outcome of the public sector has been significantly higher than public schools. We mentioned that Iranian government has been trying to overcome this limitation by providing free excellent educational oppor-

tunity for low-income families (by developing Shahed and NemuneMardomi school), but the number of students in these schools and the competitive nature of them makes it difficult to be accepted. In addition, even in these competitions, those students who can afford tutors, out of school classes and recourses are more likely to pass these competitions. We hope that these findings would challenge the traditional Iranian educational system and introduce an alternative perspective on the development and improvement of educational systems, in which school focus on not only the educational recourses and issues, but also on social, cultural and religious principles.

العوامل التي تؤثر على عمليات اختيار المدرسة لدى الوالدين الإيرانيين: دراسة نوعية

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ملخص

اختيار المدرسة عملية عالية المشاركة حيث يحتاج الوالدان فيها مراعاة العديد من العوامل عند اتخاذ هذا القرار. ومع ذلك، يبقى الكثيرون لا يعلمون الكثير عن تلك العوامل التي تؤثر على اختيار المدرسة لدى الوالدين الإيرانيين. إن الغرض من هذه الدراسة هو التعرف على العوامل التي تؤثر على عملية اختيار المدرسة لدى الوالدين الإيرانيين. ونظراً لشح الأدبيات السابقة المعنية وتلك التي لم تتناول بشكل كافٍ هذا الموضوع لدى الأسر الإيرانية، تم إجراء هذه الدراسة باستخدام البحث النوعي التوافقي (CQR). لهذه الدراسة، تم اختيار 29 من الآباء والأمهات، وإجراء مقابلات شبه مقننة. أظهرت النتائج بروز ثلاثة مجالات تؤثر في قرار الاختيار: 1- جودة المبنى المدرسي، 2- الجودة التعليمية للمدرسة، و3- المناخ المدرسي. بالإضافة إلى ذلك، ظهرت تسع عشرة فئة، تم تصنيفها إلى الفئات الثلاث المذكورة. يتم شرح نتائجها من المنظور الثقافي للمجتمع الإيراني، وتناقش الدراسة كذلك الآثار المترتبة على الهيئة التعليمية وصانعي السياسات.

الكلمات المفتاحية: اختيار المدرسة، كفاءة الأبنية التعليمية، المناخ المدرسي

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