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The Impact of Parental Choice of Primary Schools on Pupils' Learning Experiences and Academic Achievement in Mbeya City, Tanzania

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the factors influencing parents' choice of primary schools in Mbeya City Council, Tanzania. Despite the implementation of the Free Primary Education (FPE) policy, disparities in school selection persist, influenced by socio-economic, academic, and cultural factors. The study was guided by Expectancy Theory, which posits that individuals make decisions based on the perceived link between effort, performance, and reward. A qualitative research approach with a descriptive design was employed. Data were collected from 28 parents, 4 head teachers, and 2 Ward Education Officers using interviews, questionnaires, and documentary reviews. Thematic analysis following Miles and Huberman's (1994) framework was used for data analysis, ensuring trustworthiness through triangulation, member checking, and ethical considerations. Findings revealed that parents' decisions were primarily shaped by teacher competence, moral and ethical values, and school reputation. Parents viewed competent teachers as crucial to children's academic success and holistic development. They also preferred schools that emphasized discipline, character building, and strong community image, believing these contributed to future educational and social success. The study concludes that parental school choice is a rational process aligned with expectations of quality outcomes. It recommends strengthening teacher professional development, integrating moral education, and promoting transparency and community engagement to enhance parental trust and equitable access to quality education.

Keywords: Parental Choice, Primary Education, Expectancy Theory, Moral Values

Introduction

Education is widely recognized as a fundamental human right and a key driver of social, economic, and cultural development. Primary education provides the foundation for future learning, and Tanzania has enacted policies to ensure universal access, including the Free Primary Education (FPE) policy of 2015, which abolished mandatory school fees in public schools (URT, 2016). This aligns with international commitments such as the Education 2030 Agenda and Sustainable Development Goal 4 (UNESCO, 2017). Despite compulsory education, parents retain discretion in choosing schools, influencing pupils' learning experiences and outcomes (Galabawa, 2020). Decisions are shaped by economic capacity, with wealthier parents preferring private schools for better facilities and motivated teachers, while others opt for public schools despite challenges like overcrowding (Nguni, 2018; World Bank, 2021). Academic performance also guides choices, as parents monitor national examination results to secure better opportunities for their children (Benson, 2020; Kulwa & Shaban, 2021; Kassimoto, 2019), though some rely on proximity, convenience, or advice from peers (Mfaume, 2019). In Mbeya City, high-performing schools have heightened parental expectations, increasing demand for top institutions (Mbeya Regional Standard Seven National Examination Analysis, 2023, 2024).

Parental decisions regarding school selection are influenced by a combination of economic, social, cultural, and educational factors. Academic quality and school reputation are among the most prominent determinants, as parents prioritize schools known for high academic performance, strong examination results, and qualified teaching staff, believing these attributes create better learning environments and future opportunities (Levacic, 2017; Hattie, 2018; Carnoy et al., 2017; Darling-Hammond et al., 2019). Socioeconomic status further shapes school choice, with higher-income and better-educated families often accessing private and well-resourced schools aligned with long-term educational goals, while low-income families may prioritize affordability or proximity (Lubienski & Lubienski, 2017; Bruns et al., 2018; Coleman et al., 2015; UNESCO, 2017). Social networks, peer recommendations, and advice from community members also influence decisions, illustrating the interplay between economic and social factors (Ball et al., 2012; Levin, 2017). Beyond academics and economics, parents consider school environment, safety, and accessibility, favoring institutions with supportive teachers, positive culture, secure facilities, and convenient locations to minimize commuting difficulties and align with work schedules (Glewwe & Muralidharan, 2016; OECD, 2018; Taylor & Francis Online, 2017; Repam Journal, 2018; Ayoub, 2019; Bakar & Mwila, 2022; Finn et al., 2017). Collectively, these factors demonstrate that parental school choice reflects a multidimensional evaluation of academic, social, economic, and practical considerations.

Parental choice has significant implications for equity and educational outcomes. Strategic decisions based on school performance and resources can improve children's opportunities, while arbitrary choices may limit access to quality education, reflecting structural inequalities (UNICEF, 2018). Globally, parents consider academic quality, safety, teacher effectiveness, and reputation, yet contextual factors such as poverty, cultural norms, and policies influence decisions (Bosetti, 2015; Burgess et al., 2020; Musset, 2019; Oketch & Rolleston, 2016). In Mbeya, school selection has become a strategic investment in children's futures, reflecting aspirations for upward mobility and long-term benefits (Ngowi, 2022). Understanding economic, performance-related, and arbitrary factors is critical for parents, educators, and policymakers seeking to promote equitable access and quality primary education in Tanzania.

Theoretical Perspectives

This study was guided by the Expectancy Theory, introduced by Victor Vroom in 1964, which emphasizes motivation and decision-making based on individuals' expectations of desired outcomes. The theory explains that human behavior is shaped by evaluations of effort, performance, and reward, and that individuals are motivated when they believe their actions will lead to valued results. In the context of this study, it provides a framework for understanding parents' choice of primary schools, as these decisions are influenced by expectations regarding children's academic performance, learning experiences, and future opportunities. Expectancy refers to the belief that enrolling a child in a particular school (effort) will lead to strong academic performance (performance), instrumentality reflects the perception that good performance will result in rewards such as access to competitive secondary schools and social mobility, and valence captures the value parents attach to these outcomes. Applying this theory to Mbeya City Council, parental school choice represents a strategic investment in children's education, highlighting the importance of understanding economic, performance-related, and situational factors to promote equitable access and enhance learning outcomes aligned with parental expectations.

Materials and Methods

The study was conducted in Mbeya City Council, Tanzania, chosen for its strong academic performance and low dropout rates, focusing on two purposively selected wards that represented diverse school types, socio-economic backgrounds, and cultural compositions. A qualitative research approach with a descriptive design was employed to explore parents', headteachers', and Ward Education Officers' perspectives on school choice. The study population included 2 Ward Education Officers, 4 headteachers (2 from public and 2 private), and 28 randomly selected parents across all grades, with purposive sampling for key informants and probability sampling for parents. Data were collected through structured and semi-structured interviews, questionnaires, and documentary review of school records and policy documents, allowing triangulation. This approach provided a comprehensive understanding of the academic, socio-cultural, economic, and practical factors influencing parental decision-making in selecting primary schools in Mbeya City.

Data analysis

Data were collected using interviews with parents, headteachers, and Ward Education Officers, as well as documentary review of school records and policy documents. Qualitative data were analyzed using Miles and Huberman's (1994) three-step framework of data reduction, data display, and conclusions drawing and verification. Trustworthiness was ensured through triangulation of multiple data sources, member checking, and consistency in data collection and analysis procedures. Ethical issues, including informed consent, confidentiality, voluntary participation, and formal permissions from relevant authorities, were carefully observed throughout the study.

Findings

Parents' Perceptions and Expectations

Parental perceptions and expectations emerged as crucial factors influencing the choice of primary schools. Parents hold strong beliefs about the quality of education, teacher competence, and overall school environment, which guide their decision-making. Expectations regarding academic success, moral development, and holistic child growth heavily inform the selection process. This theme captures parents' insights, beliefs, and anticipations about what constitutes a suitable school for their children, highlighting how these perceptions influence enrollment decisions.

Teacher Competence

Teacher quality was consistently cited by parents as a central determinant in selecting schools. Parents perceived competent teachers as capable of enhancing their children's academic performance and fostering critical thinking skills. Teacher behavior, commitment, and instructional methods were all considered key indicators of school quality. Parents expressed confidence that the presence of experienced and motivated teachers would ensure better learning outcomes and personal development for their children.

A parent explained the importance of teachers in school selection:

I always ask to meet the teachers before enrolling my child because I want to know their qualifications and teaching style. I feel that a skilled and caring teacher can make a huge difference in my child's learning. Even if a school has good infrastructure, I won't choose it if the teachers are

inexperienced or unmotivated. I believe my child will benefit most when teachers are competent and actively engage students in learning. This is why teacher quality is my top consideration when selecting a school (Parent, August, 2025).

A headteacher reflected on parental inquiries about teaching staff:

Parents frequently inquire about the qualifications of our teaching staff. They are interested not just in degrees but in how teachers interact with students and manage classrooms. Many parents even visit classrooms during open days to observe lessons firsthand. They believe that effective teaching is the foundation of academic success. This shows that parents place a high premium on teacher competence when choosing schools. (Headteacher, August, 2025)

A Ward Education Officer shared observations regarding teacher expectations:

During school enrollment discussions, parents often ask about teacher experience and training programs. They want to ensure that their children are taught by capable staff who can cater to individual learning needs. Some parents even prefer schools that offer continuous professional development for teachers. They perceive teacher competence as directly linked to their child's academic and social growth. Clearly, teacher quality significantly influences parents' perceptions and school choice. (Ward Education Officer, August, 2025)

The findings indicate that parents strongly associate teacher competence with academic success and holistic child development. Teachers are viewed not only as transmitters of knowledge but also as role models and facilitators of critical thinking. Parents' emphasis on teacher qualifications, experience, and instructional approach reflects a rational expectation that competent teaching directly contributes to their child's performance and overall growth. This aligns with Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory, which posits those environmental factors, including human influences, shape behavior and outcomes.

Moral and Ethical Values

Parents also prioritize schools that they perceive to instill strong moral and ethical values. Beyond academics, parents consider character development, discipline, and social behavior as essential outcomes of education. Schools that integrate value-based education, encourage respect, and promote a supportive culture attract parental preference. This subtheme highlights how parents' expectations extend beyond tangible academic results to include personal and social development, reflecting holistic educational goals.

A parent shared their perspective on moral values:

I want my child to learn honesty, respect, and responsibility alongside academic subjects. I look for schools that teach moral lessons, have strict discipline policies, and encourage good behavior. It's important to me that my child grows up understanding right from wrong and interacts respectfully with others. Even if a school has excellent academics, I won't choose it if I feel it neglects moral development. Character building is as important as grades when I select a school. (Parent, August, 2025).

A headteacher explained parental emphasis on ethical education:

Many parents ask about our code of conduct and value education programs before enrollment. They want assurance that children will learn to be responsible citizens. Parents are concerned not only with academics but also with behavior and social skills. Schools that promote teamwork, honesty, and respect are preferred. This demonstrates that moral and ethical guidance is central to parental expectations. (Headteacher, August, 2025).

A Ward Education Officer observed:

Parents consistently inquire about how schools address discipline, ethics, and character development. They believe these aspects are critical for shaping children into well-rounded individuals. A school with strong value-based programs is more attractive, even if tuition is higher. Parents see moral guidance as a non-negotiable part of education. Thus, ethical education strongly influences school choice in our wards. (Ward Education Officer, August, 2025).

The findings suggest that parents in Mbeya City expect schools to provide a holistic education encompassing moral and ethical development. This expectation goes beyond academic outcomes, highlighting the importance of social-emotional learning in parental decision-making. Schools that promote discipline, respect, honesty, and social responsibility are favored, reinforcing the role of education as a transformative social force. These perceptions align with holistic educational theories, which emphasize the interconnection of cognitive, emotional, and ethical development. The implication is that schools must balance academic excellence with structured moral guidance to meet parental expectations effectively.

School Reputation and Image

The reputation and public image of a school emerged as a significant factor shaping parental choices. Parents often rely on community opinions, past performance records, and word-of-mouth recommendations to assess whether a school meets their expectations. A school with a strong track record of academic success, discipline, and alumni achievements is often considered more desirable. Reputation thus acts as both a reflection of historical performance and a predictor of future outcomes.

A parent explained how they consider school reputation in decision-making:

Before enrolling my child, I usually ask other parents about their experiences with the school. If I hear that the school produces top students and maintains good discipline, I feel more confident. Sometimes I even check the school's performance history in national exams. A strong reputation gives me assurance that my child will also succeed. So, the school's name and image in the community influence my decision a lot. (Parent, August, 2025).

A headteacher described how reputation affects enrollment:

Our enrollment numbers often rise or fall based on how the community perceives us. If our students perform well in exams, parents come in greater numbers the following year. Even parents who don't visit the school directly may choose us because of what they hear in the neighborhood. This means our public image is as important as our actual resources. A positive reputation attracts parents just as much as infrastructure and teachers. (Headteacher, August, 2025).

A Ward Education Officer reflected on reputation in school selection:

Parents frequently base their choices on a school's past performance records. Even if a school has improved recently, its past reputation can still influence current decisions. This shows how deeply community perceptions are tied to school selection. A strong reputation builds trust among parents who may not have time to investigate all details. Therefore, a school's image in the community plays a critical role in decision-making. (Ward Education Officer, August, 2025)

The findings highlight that school reputation functions as a powerful social filter through which parents interpret school quality. Reputation is constructed not only from academic performance but also from discipline, alumni success, and community narratives. Parents' reliance on reputation reflects a trust in collective community wisdom, especially when direct evaluation is challenging. This perspective resonates with theories of social capital, where networks and shared experiences influence individual decisions. The implication is that schools must actively maintain and communicate their achievements, as both historical success and consistent performance shape their attractiveness to parents.

Discussion

Parents' perceptions and expectations play a critical role in their choice of primary schools, influencing decisions beyond tangible factors such as location or facilities. In Mbeya, parents evaluate schools based on anticipated educational outcomes, linking teacher competence, moral and ethical values, and institutional reputation to potential student success. Teacher competence is viewed as central to fostering critical thinking, holistic development, and strong academic performance, with skilled and experienced educators who engage in professional development attracting higher enrollment (Darling-Hammond, 2017; Hattie, 2009). Moral and ethical education, emphasizing honesty, respect, discipline, and teamwork, is equally valued, as structured character programs signal a school's commitment to holistic development (Berkowitz & Bier, 2005; Lickona, 2012). School reputation, shaped by historical performance, alumni success, and community standing, further guides parental choices by indicating credibility and consistent results (Coleman, 1988; Bourdieu, 1986). These patterns align with Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory, highlighting environmental influences on learning, and Expectancy Theory, which emphasizes that parents' decisions are motivated by the belief that quality schooling will yield desired academic and social rewards for their children.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Parental choice of primary schools in Mbeya City is shaped by teacher competence, moral and ethical values, and school reputation, as these factors are perceived to influence academic performance and holistic development. Parents make rational, goal-oriented decisions to maximize educational and social benefits for their children, consistent with Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory and Expectancy Theory. The study recommends Schools' management to enhance teacher competence, provide moral and ethical education, and maintain a positive reputation through transparency and community engagement. Policymakers should support equitable access to quality schools and provide guidance to help parents make informed decisions, while future research should explore which specific factors most influence parental school choice.

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